

## **ABSTRACT**

### **EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY: TRAINING RURAL PASTORS TO PREACH EVANGELISM AND DISCIPLESHIP IN LIBERIA**

By

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This study was geared towards equipping rural pastors within the United Methodist Church in Liberia to become effective in their ministerial practice, especially in the area of preparing and delivering sermons that are biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent. Rural pastors serve in towns and villages where there are very limited socio-economic, educational and other critical life enabling and sustaining services. These rural pastors are in direct contact with competing religious ideas such as Islam and other African Traditional religious practices.

Equipping rural pastors through training to effectively prepare and deliver sermons will make them efficient in preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ and by so doing through their preaching more people will come to faith in Jesus Christ. However, biblical literacy remains critical if rural pastors are to be good at preaching. The United Methodist Church uses what it refers to as the quadrilateral in its theological reflections: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Scripture is primary for faith and sound theology.

In the African church, scripture remains the prime source in seeking to know and understand God. In most of the training modules develop for rural pastors, the memorization scriptural passages is a top priority. In what is known as knocking at the devil's door, pastors are taught to memorize specific Bible verses and during prayer they would quote these verses and challenge the devil. Biblical literacy remains core to any

training initiative geared toward equipping rural pastors to preach evangelism and discipleship in Liberia.

The purpose of this study was to measure the changes in knowledge, attitude, and practices among rural pastors in the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church who participated in a five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblical based, properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent sermons. Twenty-five rural pastors selected from the Gbarnga District Conference of the United Methodist Church in Liberia participated in this training. All the participants were rural pastors who do not have the academic qualification to pursue seminary education. But they undergo periodic trainings organized by the Board of Ordained Ministry as part of a continuing education program to sharpen their ministerial capacities. Pastors in this category are eligible to be ordained associate elders when they receive five consecutive trainings.

From cradle until death, people are always leaning new ideas and undergoing trainings to improve skills at what they do. During the duration of this study this reality came alive through lessons learned and major findings discovered. It became evident that rural pastors are very eager to be trained periodically so that they are effective in proclaiming God's word. It was revealed repeatedly during the five-day training and later with the focus group that training is critical if they are to be good at preparing and delivering sermons. Because of the active engagement of participants during the training event, it became evident that training sites could be an appropriate venue to identify persons to be trainers-of-trainers. Because rural pastors rely solely on trainings offered by the Board of Ordained Ministry, which is usually short-term, the establishment of a

school devoted to training rural pastors can't be overemphasized. Such a school would serve as a hub to train rural pastors not only in preaching but also in theology and other areas of pastoral ministry.

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY: TRAINING RURAL PASTORS TO PREACH  
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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Overview of the Chapter**

At the last conference session prior to his retirement in 1999, Liberia United Methodist Church Bishop, Rev. Dr. Arthur Flomo Kulah, made a profound statement that continues to resonate. He told the conference that he looks forward to seeing the ministerial capacity of rural pastors, who are serving in villages and towns across the Liberia Episcopal area of the United Methodist Church, enhanced through an intentional training program that meets their needs and context. Many of these rural pastors do not have the requisite educational background to pursue formal theological education. But they are making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of Liberia. Despite their academic limitations, rural pastors have to meet the challenges of evangelism and discipleship in Liberia, which can be done, through effective preaching, one of the critical missing dimensions of many rural pastors.

At the time Bishop Kulah expressed his vision for the future of ministerial formation for rural pastors, the researcher was a District Superintendent who understood the exigency of meeting the ministry needs of rural pastors especially training them to preach for evangelism and discipleship. This project has grown out of that understanding. This chapter introduces the researcher and articulates reasons for wanting to explore such a project. It also gives the statement of the problem that has necessitated the project and describes its purpose. The chapter further postulates relevant questions to guide the direction of the project and explains its rationale. Additionally, this chapter discusses the rationale and relevance of the project, defines key terms, expresses the delimitations, and offers a brief review of the relevant literature.

## Personal Introduction

Rural pastors of the United Methodist Church in Liberia need to become more effective in their sermons to continue the mission of evangelism and discipleship. The urgency for training pastors to preach for evangelism and discipleship can be traced to the spiritual effects of the fourteen-year civil war in Liberia and the aggressive movement of Islam in rural Liberia. Rupert Sheldrake notes how some who fought in the Liberian civil war resorted to traditional religious practices, such as human sacrifice, to have success in the war. This was confirmed by Jeffrey Ross who explains how some “combatants...used shamanistic charms and other animist protection” to defend themselves “from the enemy’s bullets” (27). A Muslim who had converted to Christianity admitted to a plan of Saudi Arabia “to make all Liberia’s small mosques grand places” (Gifford, 266). By 2015, according to reports, detailed plans were underway “to Islamize Liberia” (“Muslim Plan” par. 1).

As a clergy in the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, I have served for several years as member of the Board of Ordained Ministry. The foregoing factors present motivation to proclaim the Gospel more effectively by all clergy, especially those in the rural areas. This action includes evangelizing and promoting spiritual growth because from all indications Islam appears to be growing in the rural areas of Liberia owing to the seemingly compatibility of Islam to most of the cultural practices of rural inhabitants of Liberia. For instance, Islam encourages polygamy, a marital practice that is also congenial to most of the cultural practices of rural Liberia. Also, the system of animal sacrifices in Islam is also exceedingly appealing to rural dwellers in Liberia. The Board of Ordained Ministry, which I chair, is responsible

to help persons called to ministry discern their call and to help lead them in the ordination process. I have been actively involved in training pastors, especially in their understanding of Scripture and helping them prepare and deliver sermons that are biblically sound, following the principles of exegesis.

Over the years, I have thought of ways to be engaged with these rural pastors through training opportunities to make them more efficient in their ministerial work. It is this burning desire within me that continues to motivate and inspire me to take the leap of faith in preparing men and women for God's Kingdom work. Though rural pastors are doing their best in terms of preaching the Gospel and winning souls for the Kingdom of God, with proper training in the techniques of both engaging scripture and communicating scripture, they can become more grounded in their understanding of scripture and pastoral care and accordingly, become even more valuable preachers of the Word. Through this project, I develop a curriculum that will be used as a guide in preparing these rural pastors in the United Methodist Church in Liberia in their drive to evangelize and facilitate spiritual growth among their local congregations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

A majority of rural pastors are faced with the daunting challenge of preaching sermons that invite and inspire listeners to receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior without the requisite training most ministers receive. These rural pastors have the energy and passion for ministry. But without proper equipping in the rudiments of sound preaching, it will remain a challenge for them to preach the types of sermons that more easily facilitate discipleship and church growth. This project seeks to provide a means of

preparing them to become proficient in preaching the types of sermons that will help persuade rural Liberians to convert to Jesus, and spur spiritual growth.

Rural pastors are missing the skills necessary to undertake sound biblical interpretation, and the tools to prepare and deliver stimulating sermons to convert persons to Christ and stimulate spiritual maturity. When rural pastors have access to relevant preaching tools and strategies to proclaim the Gospel in their rural realities, they will propagate the Gospel to rural people.

### **Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this research was to measure changes in knowledge, attitude and practices among rural pastors in the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church who participated in a five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent sermons.

### **Research Questions**

#### **Research Question #1**

What were the levels of knowledge, attitude, and practice among rural pastors in the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church prior to the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based sermons that follow the principles of proper exegesis and are theologically sound?

#### **Research Question #2**

What were the levels of knowledge, attitude, and practice among rural pastors in the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church following the five-day

training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based, properly exegeted, and theologically sound sermon?

### **Research Question #3**

What portions of the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based, properly exegeted, and theologically sound sermons need to be changed, added to, removed, or retained in order to improve the knowledge, attitude and practice of participants?

### **Rationale for the Project**

The United Methodist Church in Liberia is growing. The current membership of the Annual Conference stands at 286,000 (2018 Conference Journal). Notwithstanding this trend of membership increase, rural pastors have a need for additional preaching skills in reaching people. Rural pastors who are unable to enroll in formal theological colleges due to limited education, are making this happen with knowledge they acquire through occasional training they receive from the Board of Ordained Ministry pastoral training initiatives. A missing component is a more systematic and organized training program for these pastors that will empower them to preach sermons that motivate Christians toward maturity and convert others to Christ through the hearing of the Gospel.

The rationale for this project has as its biblical foundation Acts 1.8: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea, and in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* A local United Methodist church is visible in almost every village and town in Liberia. Rural pastors, often referred to as foot soldiers, are at the frontline in making this happen, but strong

indications remain that they need additional knowledge, skills, and abilities to stimulate discipleship and, evangelize non-Christians.

This project is important because as rural pastors serve in settings ranging from their own home to villages far away (that is, in their own Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria), with knowledge acquired through training, they will have the necessary tools to help them promote spiritual growth among their congregations. Training for pastors to address these issues is critical because the Board of Ordained Ministry has witnessed significant improvement in the pastoral performance of rural pastors after they receive training. For example, after every training event administered by the Board of Ordained Ministry, the Board's training committee receives reports from District Committees chairpersons that they get from local churches about improvements they observed in their pastors in the area of preaching as a result of the training.

Another category of pastors serving rural areas that need to be trained are illiterate pastors who make use of their local vernacular in preaching and teaching. The challenge for these pastors is that there are very few local languages that have written scripts. Pastors in this category use oral presentations in their native languages to preach and teach. When pastors acquire specific skills in the techniques of using oral means to reach out to oral learners, they will promote spiritual growth, win converts from the traditional religion, and combat the spread of Islam. These oral learners will then be able to reach out to other oral learners with the Gospel message and provide a means of empowerment for and to them.

Finally, this project is important because it seeks to enhance church growth and expansion. Pastors should be able to prepare sermons that are based on scripture, and properly exegeted so that hearers of the Gospel message become mature believers.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

It is important that key terms to be used in the project be defined so that readers get a clear understanding of their meaning. This is critical because the context of the project may require the use of certain words that are contextual to the project locale.

#### **Key Terms**

1. The **United Methodist Church** is a global Protestant denomination, established in 1968, dependent on Scripture, tradition, reason and experience for its theological doctrines; it traces its denominational roots to John Wesley, with millions of members throughout the world.
2. **Episcopal Area** is an area supervised by a bishop in the United Methodist Church.
3. **Rural Area**, in a Liberian context, is an area that lacks basic social, educational, political and economic activities.
4. **Local Pastor** is a pastor under episcopal appointment (2016 UMC Book of Discipline, par. 339)
5. **Elders in Associate Order** is a clergy member in the Liberia Annual Conference who does not have the requisite education to pursue seminary education but undergo five years of training to become eligible to be ordained in the associate order. Those ordained in this order have some limitation. For example, they are not allowed to vote on several clergy issues such as matters related to ordination and ineligible to be elected to attend general of central conference in the United Methodist Church (2016 UMC Book of Discipline, par. 321)
6. **Oral Learners** are those who learn through an informal means of communication.
7. **Oral Discipling** is the means of reaching out to oral learners with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
8. **Circuit** in the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church is composed of UMC churches that have not achieved the status of a District Conference. For an area to be declared a District Conference, it should have not less than fifteen (15) viably functioning churches with at least four (4) ordained elders.
9. **Evangelism** is the proclamation of the Gospel message of Jesus Christ to the world with the aim of converting nonbelievers to Christian faith.

10. **Discipleship** is the spiritual maturation and development of converts as they become true followers of Jesus Christ.
11. **Biblically based sermon** is a sermon focused on Scripture. Every sermon is based on Scripture but in a sermon that is biblically based, the preacher relies on biblical sources while making less use of other secondary sources.
12. **Properly exegeted sermon** is one in which the preacher makes faithful use of techniques in biblical exegesis when preparing sermons.
13. **Theologically sound sermon** is a sermon in which the preacher faithfully highlights orthodox theology in ways that connects to the hearer's context and everyday life situation.

### **Delimitations**

This research is limited to rural pastors serving the United Methodist Church in Liberia. There are currently 1,008 pastors under episcopal appointment assigned across 21 District Conferences and one (1) Circuit (UMC 2020 Pre-Conference Journal). This research is limited to the Gbarnga District Conference. 25 pastors were selected to participate in a five-day training on how to prepare and deliver sermons that are based on Scripture, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

This research aims to augment the training of rural pastors with little or no formal education so that they will be able to support existing Christians in their congregations, reach persons from the traditional religion, and defend Christianity from the encroachment of Islam. The researcher further reviewed and consulted a wide range of relevant literature to be able to tackle the issue of how rural pastors can become effective in their pastoral responsibilities, particularly preaching. In order to accomplish this task, the researcher reviewed influential homiletical texts whose content furthers this project. For example, the researcher analyzed literature addressing the preacher's identity as suggested in the book *Preaching as Testimony* by Anna C. Florence, how to prepare for

Sunday morning as presented by Thomas Long in his book *The Witness of Preaching*, the nature of rural ministry in Africa with focus on Liberia from the perspective of Paul Gifford in his book *Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia*, the levels of training, attitude and practice, and the kind of training needed.

Several national and international faith-based institutions and individuals have expounded on ways to minister to persons who have not had adequate formal educational training. In an article titled *Discipling through the Eyes of Oral Learners*, W. Jay Moon attempts to highlight learning preferences for oral learners in order to reveal discipling practices that are more likely to transform them. These discipling practices, according to Moon, may include “songs, dances, rituals, dramas, stories, proverbs, and holistic development”. This research deals with rural pastors, some of whom are oral learners, even illiterate, and rely solely on various local dialects to communicate the gospel message. As a result, Moon’s insights are critical in the development of relevant tools to be used by these pastors in their pastoral ministry.

This research depended on the works of *Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization*, an international movement committed to energizing “the whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole world.” The work of the Committee focuses on the critical task of making the Word of God available to unreached people using relevant oral communication methodologies. The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in recognizing the prevalence of syncretism in most rural cultures, advance suggestions to make the gospel appealing to oral learners using culturally relevant and adaptable oral means.

The research also consulted several rural pastors about their experiences in communicating the gospel to congregations in their various contexts. Through interviewing them, pastors shared their experiences as to how they have been ministering over the years using means they felt were applicable for their local context. Responses from them proved helpful in developing a manual or tool to be used as guide in making the Word of God germane for rural pastors on the one hand and a usable template that can be used to improve the practice of ministry for rural pastors.

### **Research Methodology**

This project uses qualitative research method to explore how rural pastors, some of whom are oral learners, go about proclaiming the truth of the gospel message in their context. Oral learners and vernacular speaking pastors make up the core of United Methodist pastors that serve in rural areas. They need help in interpreting Scripture and sermon preparation so that the messages they preach can be understood by members of their various congregations while attracting non-Christians.

This research seeks to measure the changes in knowledge, attitude, and practices among these rural pastors in the United Methodist Church in Liberia who participated in a five-day training on how to prepare and deliver biblically based, properly exegeted, and theologically sound sermons. A questionnaire was developed and shared with participants selected to take part in the training event. The objective of giving out the questionnaire was to find out the current level of knowledge, attitude and practices of the rural pastors prior to and after the five-day training, and to determine the impact of the training on them at the end of the training event.

A pre-intervention survey was used to determine the current level of knowledge of pastors before and after the five-day training. Thereafter a post-intervention survey was administered to determine the impact of the training on the effectiveness of participants.

### **Type of Research**

The research was an intervention as it sought to improve the ministerial skills of rural pastors most of whom need training to become more effective in the area of biblical interpretation, sermon preparation and delivery for the purpose of stimulating spiritual development and evangelizing nonbelievers. To adequately achieve this task, the researcher used a qualitative method of analysis.

### **Participants**

Twenty-five pastors participated in this research. The participants were selected from the Gbarnga District Conference in Central Liberia. The researcher worked with the District Superintendent in selecting pastors.

### **Instrumentation**

Two instruments used were used to collect the data for this research: a focus group survey and a pre/post-test questionnaire.

The Focus Group Survey was used determine the quantity of rural pastors in the Liberia Episcopal Area of the United Methodist Church.

The Pre/Post-Test Questionnaire was used to explore the level of training rural pastors had prior to and following the training event on how to prepare sermons that are biblically based, properly exegeted and theologically sound.

**Data Collection**

The specific methodology for data collection involved both a pre-intervention and post-intervention survey questionnaire. It also included a semi-structured interview with participants in the five-day training. Because the project is qualitative in content and scope, the researcher joined the participants as a facilitator. The first two days were focused on the pre-test questionnaire. Two days dealt with the post-test and the last day concentrated on what was most helpful or least helpful about the training event. The data collection lasted three weeks.

**Data Analysis**

After the research instruments were received, the data resulting from the survey and questionnaire were reviewed and analyzed several times to ensure that data was scrutinized and conclusions accurately supported. The instruments were analyzed to gather consistent thought patterns and recurring themes among the participants in the study.

**Generalizability**

This research measures the level of knowledge, attitude, and practices among rural pastors of the United Methodist Church in Liberia prior to and after they participated in a five-day training event. At the end of the training, the data collected, reviewed and analyzed showed that there was a significant improvement in the level of knowledge, attitude, and practices among rural pastors on how to prepare and deliver biblically based, properly exegeted, and theologically sound sermons. When rural pastors acquire knowledge at this level, the resulting overall impact is church growth through

evangelization and discipleship. The researcher believes this research is well suited to be used in other ministry contexts where the training of pastors for areas with low level of literacy is required.

### **Project Overview**

Chapter 2, which is the review of related literature, focuses on themes including the preacher's identity, preparing for Sunday morning, the nature of rural pastoral ministry in Liberia, levels of knowledge, attitude and practice among rural pastors, and what is needed in the training. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology employed to collect and analyze data. In Chapter 4, the researcher uses the data collected through the instruments to address the research questions. Chapter 5 presents the researcher's analysis and synthesis of the major findings.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

This project's central research question examines the type of training necessary for rural pastors in Liberia to deliver effective sermons that evangelize and lead to spiritual growth through discipleship. The literature review covers themes such as the biblical foundations of training rural pastors, teaching as a biblical mandate, the nature of pastoral ministry in rural Africa with a focus on Liberia, the theological foundations for such training in Africa, particularly Liberia, and the kind of training necessary to equip rural pastors for ministry.

#### **Biblical Foundations**

##### **The Spoken Word**

Genesis 1-2 records God's act of creating the world out of nothing. God spoke and ordered creation and it came to pass. God created the heaven and earth. God later ordered that there be light, earth, water, sun, moon, animals, and lastly God created humankind in God's image and likeness. The story of God's creative work points to the power of God's word. When God said let there be light immediately light came into being. There is power in the word of God. When God speaks something significant is bound to happen. Similarly, when rural pastors speak the word of God the lives of those who hear and heed the word lives are changed forever.

The earth was full of emptiness but by the spoken word of God the earth took shape.

When God spoke, the earth became inhabited with fruits and other edibles. The implication for rural pastors is that there is power in the Word of God. When rural pastors speak on behalf of God the word will accomplish that which it seeks to achieve, to save

the souls of those who hear it. Speaking of the power of the spoken word, Matthew Henry writes: “God said let there be light; God willed it, and at once there was light. Oh, the power of the Word of God.” (31)

### **The Word of God**

A common text about the ‘Word of God’ is in Paul’s second letter to Timothy: “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (II Tim. 3.16-17 NIV) The ‘Word’ of God is God’s spoken word, spoken to humans through different mediums: through the prophets to the people of God, throughout history and even today. Because the ‘word of God’ is God-breathed, it is critical that rural pastors undergo some training to equip them to speak with boldness and truth. Speaking about the ‘word’ Isaiah writes: “so my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (Isa. 55.11 NIV).

In his book *Preaching & Cultural Identity: Proclaiming the Gospel in Africa*, John Wesley Zwomunondiita Kurewa writes that “Christ is the Word of God.” (100). He argues that in the African context the word of the chief is seen as living even in the absence of the chief the word of the chief accomplishes what it intends to accomplish. Kurewa asserts that “For the African pastor, Christ is the Word of God because as Africans we believe that God’s revelation, starting even with our own ancestors, culminated in Jesus Christ, and that Christ has also become for us the Word of God.”(102) The implication here is that if the word of a chief can accomplish its purpose in his absence, the Word of God can accomplish far more in abundance.

This means the “word” will accomplish its purpose: lives will be changed. Those who thirst will find stream of flowing water to drink. The broken hearted will find peace; those who are denied justice will find justice. Those who live and survived at the margins of society will find hope in the “word” of God when it is declared or preached by persons entrusted with it. Persons who are entrusted with the “word” of God ought to know that it is a very serious business. Warning would-be preacher who serve as God’s mouthpiece, Jeremiah writes: “Let the prophet who has a dream recount the dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain? Declares the Lord. Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that break a rock in pieces?” (Jer. 23.28-29 NIV)

The implication of Jeremiah’s warning for ministry is that preachers ought to realize that being a spokesperson for God is a serious matter, especially for rural pastors that are to undergo training to effectively preach evangelism and discipleship in Liberia. The Word of God is never preached and returned without accomplishing its purpose of impacting lives. It is capable of destroying demonic strongholds. There is nothing on earth and in heaven that the ‘word of God’ cannot accomplish. The description of Jeremiah that the ‘word of God’ is like a hammer suggests the Word of God is capable of breaking any stronghold. In other words, it can calm the storms believers face in life and give them reason to keep moving on. It is this ‘word’ that never goes out without accomplishing its purpose that Paul is urging his son in ministry to preach.

Paul’s admonition to Timothy states:

“Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come

when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.” (II Tim. 4.2-5 NIV)

The admonition of Paul is even more relevant for preachers today, a call to preach the ‘word of God’ at all times. It was and remains a call to preach the ‘word’ and not preachers themselves. It is sad to witness preachers preaching about themselves. They spend much of the preaching moment to impress people about how educated they are and how blessed they have been because of their act of piety and so forth.

In *Matthew Henry’s Bible Commentary*, the point is made that the time will come when people of this age will turn away from the truth of the gospel to seek what they want to hear and what seem to suit and conform to their immorality. Matthew Henry writes “People do so when they endure that preaching which is searching, plain, and to the purpose. They who love souls must be even watchful, must venture and bear all the painful effects of their faithfulness, and take all opportunities of making known the pure gospel.” (1310).

Paul reminds Timothy and also cautions those who aspire to the ministry of preaching to be prepared at all times to preach the Word of God, being cognizant of the fact that there will be folks with itchy ears who will condemn or even go to the extent of wanting to persecute the preacher if the message does not suit their taste. Preachers today are faced with similar challenge. When the political establishment of the church is not comfortable with their message of salvation, especially when they are confronted with their sin

through the message, they find way to get the preacher out of the church through the political system of the church.

### **The Importance of the Spoken Word**

What is the Word, and why does it matter? Many people do not realize the importance of the spoken word or the impact they have on their wellbeing. The Word is God's words spoken to humanity through different mediums. The 'word of God' gave rise to the created order, creating the world out of nothing. When the world was formless and darkness covered it, God caused the world to take form (Gen. 1.1-24). The word of God has transformative power capable of changing things that seem unchangeable. It has the power to break down strongholds, heal the sick, and cleanse those who are possessed by demonic forces.

Throughout history, there are countless stories of God calling and speaking to people directly. God called several people to speak on behalf of God. God called prophets directly and used them to speak to God's people. There was never a time that God called prophets and the purpose of their calling was not achieved.

The prophet Isaiah states:

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out of my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it”. (Isa. 55. 10-11 NIV)

The implication for rural pastors is that when they avail themselves for the pastoral ministry, they believe strongly that God called them to preach the 'word of God' and they

believe God's purpose will be achieved through them. It is the 'word of God' that rural pastors in Liberia have been preaching over the years, reaching people in villages and towns while depending on the Holy Spirit to bring people to the saving grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

### **People Perish for Lack of Knowledge**

When Jesus knew that his time on earth was coming to a climax, He gave instruction to his disciples to continue His ministry in these words: "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commended you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age". (Matt. 28.19-20, Daily Companion Bible) This Bible passage is foundational to what this project seeks to accomplish because it lays the basis for why it is important to train rural pastors. Jesus knew his disciples were to go into unfamiliar terrains and they needed to be equipped in order to carry out His mission and vision. Having been equipped with the Holy Spirit, Jesus commanded them to go and make disciples.

In consultation with the Gbarnga District Superintendent, the researcher selected twenty-five rural pastors who participated in a five-day training on how to prepare sermons that are biblically based, guided by the principles of exegesis, and adequately delivered.

**Teaching: A Biblical Mandate**

Teaching is a biblical mandate (Matt. 28.20a). Consistent with this biblical truth, Paul writes to his spiritual son Timothy in these words: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” (II Tim. 2.15 NIV). After addressing the issue of those who are leading people astray with false teaching, Paul now turns to another important matter with Timothy. The point Paul makes is that those who present themselves worthy to be messengers of God must work hard to please God in what they do. Rural pastors must work hard to prepare themselves if they are to be effective in their pastoral ministry and this can happen through appropriate training opportunities. God wants God’s servants to be able to articulate the Gospel message in clear and unambiguous way. It must be noted that Paul’s rural origin of Lystra and Debre, unlike large areas of Ephesus and Corinth, is not much different from the rural nature of the communities of the rural pastors involved in the five-day training.

Paul admonished Timothy to take his ministry seriously, a similar argument this researcher makes to rural pastors who participated in a five-day training event. Like it was during Timothy’s days, there exist today many false prophets whose messages mislead people in their faith journey in dangerous and damaging ways. Paul’s admonition that preachers show themselves approved unto God is even more relevant today, especially for rural pastors who are often confronted with competing African Traditional religious practices and Islam in all their forms and practices. These rural pastors confront hostile situations from competing religious groups in their ministry contexts. How can

those who take the Gospel to lost souls in rural communities in Liberia, for example, know how to do so without being trained? It is only through an intentional training initiative that rural pastors will be able to win souls for Jesus and expand the kingdom of God on earth.

The biblical mandate to teach came directly from Jesus Himself. Before departing the world through the Ascension, Jesus instructed his apostles to make disciples by “teaching them to obey everything I have commended you” (Matt. 28.20 NIV). Throughout the history of the church, teaching remained an indispensable component. Packer points out that the word, “disciples” is rooted in “a Greek word meaning, precisely, learning.” (xiii). This implies the Apostles were first and foremost students of Jesus who were taught for three years. In the early church up to the second century, converts to Christianity were not baptized until they completed a catechetical school for three years. Many rural pastors did not have the opportunity to pursue higher education because many rural areas lack educational opportunities. Notwithstanding their limitation, they are always willing and available to be trained so as to enhance improve their ministries. All the trainings offered by the Board of Ordained Ministry are done free of charge and this project, like what is done by the Board of Ordained Ministry, seeks to strengthen the capacity of rural pastors.

During the Middle Ages, teaching and learning transitioned from the monastic schools, which focused on scriptural studies (Jaegar 1), to the cathedral schools where “a schoolmaster could teach freely to poor students” to learn grammar and the various liberal arts” to produce more literate Christians (Glick, Livesey, and Wallis 122).

When it came to Christian missions, education and teaching were necessary dimensions of discipleship. As Egbunu writes, “at the center of Christian discipleship is the need to relate to the Bible” thus requiring the new convert “be taught to know that...the Holy Bible is the unshakeable foundation for faith” (30). This belief produced mission schools in Africa, and Liberia specifically, leading to the existence of the Gbarnga School of Theology, which evolved into the United Methodist University. It is through the Gbarnga School of Theology that theological education is offered. Since many rural pastors from villages in Liberia do not have the educational qualification such as a high school education, training for the rural pastors outside of the training at the Gbarnga School of Theology at the United Methodist University emerged.

### **Impact of the Spoken Word**

#### **Moses Speaks to the People of Israel**

Moses had been serving as God’s spokesperson since he was called by God. When he neared the end of his prophetic mission, he summoned God’s people to perhaps deliver what can be termed his farewell speech. Deuteronomy 32.46-47 sets the tone of Moses’ last words to the people of God:

“Make sure you obey all these commands that I have given you today. Repeat them to your children, so that they may faithfully obey all God’s teachings. These teachings are not empty words; they are your very life. Obey them and you will live long in that land across the Jordan that you are about to occupy.” (Good News Bible)

These words record an important speech of Moses to the people of God at a very critical moment in their history. The central message of Moses to God's people is for them to remain faithful to the God of their ancestors. This message came at the appropriate time because the people of Israel were approaching the land promised them by God. Israel was about to cross over into the promised land and Moses who had led them during the most difficult period in their history was nearing his end. Moses, the greatest leader of God's people was soon to die.

History may not have an audio version of Moses' speech as he expounded these words to his people but what can be deduced from the tune of his message is the seriousness, passion and authenticity with which Moses convey his message to God's people, a message urging them to remain faithful to God at all times, especially as they journey to the land of promise.

According to Matthew Henry, for people who had been accustomed to following all forms of lifeless gods, Moses's message for them to turn away from serving false God to worship God Almighty was a serious matter. Moses insisted the Word of God was given not just to have them remember and recite them but to have the Word engraved on their hearts and minds so as to sustain them at all times (1310-14).

When rural pastors are trained to preach evangelism and discipleship in Liberia, they would be equipped with needed preaching skills to convict souls through the working of the Holy Spirit. Matthew Henry also argues that Moses's message cautioning the people of Israel to live by God's standards is the basis for Paul's message to the Christians in Rome as recorded in Romans 10.6-11.

Moses's authenticity is reflected in how he recounts the history of Israel in terms of how God had been good to them over the years, especially reminding them of their wilderness experience and how God delivered them from captivity in Egypt. As they prepared to enter the promise land it is a solemn moment of reflecting on the goodness of God in preparation to enter the land of promised. It is a moment of celebration and discernment.

### **The Impact of Moses's Message**

The message of Moses to God's people impacted the lives of the people in significant ways. It was a message about choosing life over death. It called their attention to choose life over death by remaining faithful to God, reminding them to ensure that the command to choose life over death is transmitted to their children. These words spoken by Moses were meaningful instructions during a critical period in the history of the people of Israel. These words from Moses were to be taken seriously by God's people because they were direct instructions from God to them. When God speaks God's word to God's people through prophets, they are impactful because they accomplish the purpose for which they are uttered.

The implication for rural pastors is that they too carry the burden of speaking the word of God to the people of God in their various congregations. They are to take the responsibility of proclaiming God's Word seriously. Through the message preached by rural pastors, God continues to remind God's people to remain faithful to God at all times; this is a sacred responsibility for those who preach the word of God.

### **Joshua's Message to God's People**

Joshua 24.1-33 contains part of Joshua's message to the people of Israel. Joshua reminds his fellow countrymen of how God has been faithful to their ancestors, beginning with their captivity in Egypt, their wilderness journey and a call to them to remain faithful.

Joshua's main message was for Israel to remain faithful to their God. He states:

“Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve Him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (Josh. 24.14-15 NIV)

In his message, Joshua recounts how God lead them from captivity to the land of promise. Most importantly, he reminds them of the miraculous acts of God that have brought them to where they found themselves and the need for them to remain loyal to God alone.

### **The Impact of Joshua's Message**

A dialogue develops between Joshua and his people that resulted in the people committing themselves to remain faithful to the God of their ancestors (Josh. 24.16-17, 24). As a result of Joshua's message, the people of Israel commit themselves to serve God and to “throw away all foreign gods and incline their hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” (Josh. 24.23 NIV) On that day, the people of Israel made a covenant to remain faithful to God at all times. At Shechem the people made a covenant with God that was

witnessed by Joshua: “On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws.” (Josh. 24.25 NIV).

### **Nathan Speaks for God**

It takes an assertive prophet to confront the royal consciousness of their day. This is what the prophet Nathan did when speaking on behalf of God in confronting David about his affair with Bathsheba. Nathan engaged David by explaining to him the story of two men, one rich and the other a poor man. The poor man owned and survived with only one lamb. In his poverty he took good care of his lamb and regarded it as part of his family. The rich man had countless amount of sheep and other animals in his possession. One day the rich man received a guest in his home and instead of killing one of his animals to entertain his guest took one of the poor man’s cattle to prepared food for his guest. This was the story Nathan narrated to David. David was so angry and said such a man deserve to die. Nathan, in a bold manner told David he was the man that deserve to die because of what he did to Uriah (II Sam. 12.1-7a NIV). As a result, Nathan gained prominence as being a prophet. King David’s trouble with God began when he observed the beauty of Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, the Hittite.

David issued a verdict in the case as set before him by Nathan not knowing it was a verdict for his own prosecution and conviction.

Nathan’s rebuke of King David as he spoke on behalf of God was: “*You* are the man! When David recognized the magnitude of his sin, he became remorseful, admitted his guilt and repented for his despicable actions against God and Uriah. Nathan’s rebuke

changed everything about David. David repented and is given another chance to begin anew.

Nathan played a significant role in restoring the character and thus the dignity of King David. King David was able to lift up his head after sinning against God. Nathan later informed King David that God had forgiven his sin.

Although God did not take David's life, there were many consequences he personally suffered because of the terrible acts of immorality he committed:

1. *You will never live in peace* (2 Sam. 12.10). David had nothing but trouble from that moment until he died. Bathsheba's grandfather, Ahithophel, one of David's trusted counselors, later worked against him and even told Absalom he would kill David for him (2 Sam. 17.2).
2. *Evil will come out of your own house* (v.11). In I Samuel 13, one of David's sons rapes one of his daughters, and then the daughter's full brother murders the rapist who is his half-brother. As with David's own sin, sexual immorality is again followed by murder, but this time in David's own house.
3. *Your wives will be defiled openly* (v.11). In II Samuel 16.22 his concubines were defiled by his son Absalom as a show of power in front of all Israel.
4. *Bathsheba's child shall die* (v.14). As a consequence of David's sin.

### **Jonah Goes on God's Mission**

Jonah's message from God to the people of Nineveh was clear: "Go to the great City of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come before me." (Jon. 1.2 NIV). Jonah accepts God's message with a sense of indifference and decides to run away

from going on God's mission. He heads to Joppa where he boards a ship on its way to Tarshish. During the journey the ship encounters a turbulent weather on account of Jonah. He is thrown off the ship into the sea and swallowed by a fish. Jonah is running away from his mission to Nineveh because he knows God is a forgiving God and the possibility is high that the people of Nineveh may heed his message and be spared God's punishment. The fish vomits Jonah on the shore and later receive the same message from God: "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." (*The New Interpreter's Study Bible*,)

This time Jonah accepts to proclaim God's message to the people of Nineveh. In a succinct proclamation Jonah cried out to the people of Nineveh: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." (Jon. 3.4 NIV). Many scholars believed Jonah proclaimed this message to every corner of Nineveh so that all could hear it and repent of their wicked ways. Jonah's message was centered on repentance, for the people of Nineveh to repent of their sins so that they are spared the pending wrath of God.

### **The People Reaction to Jonah's Message of Repentance**

As was expected by Jonah, upon hearing the message of God as spoken by Jonah, all the people of Nineveh accept and believe the message from God as proclaimed by Jonah. Everyone, from the least to the highest-ranking official of the land made a solemn commitment to fast, pray, and put-on sackcloth in seeking the face of God to forgive them of their sins. It was a public display of repentance. The act of repentance and mourning by the people of Nineveh indicates that the message of Jonah reached every

part of the City. They reaffirmed their belief and dependence on God and that they needed of God's pardon and grace.

The greatest show of remorse, humility and repentance came from the King and his nobles who ordered all to prostrate before God in obedience and seek God's forgiveness. (Jon. 3.7-9). The King removed his royal robe and put on sackcloth and immersed himself in ashes.

The act of repentance by the people of Nineveh shows that there is power in the Word of God. When the Word of God is preached or proclaimed, it has the power to change difficult situations into hopeful conditions. In other words, when the Word of God is preached it impacts those who hear it in significant ways. It changes their lives in positive ways. If they were evil doers, they usually commit to desist from doing evil. This is exactly what the prophet Isaiah alluded when he asserted:

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (Isa. 55.10-11 NIV)

The writer of Hebrew puts it this way: “For the Word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of hearts.” (Heb. 4.12 NIV).

As a result of the spoken Word of God the people of Nineveh are spared the wrath of God. The Word of God when spoken is life; it is able to create and bring into being that

which did not exist. The Word of God has the power to convict sinners to turn away from sin and embrace a new life in Jesus Christ, a life that leads to eternal life.

### **Ezra the Priest Reads the Law to the People**

When people hear and understand the Word of God spoken to them in clear and simple terms they usually respond in positive ways, doing what is commanded to be done. Often time the proclamation of God's word to God's people takes only few hours and people respond. When Ezra read the Law of Moses to the people of God it took several hours. Nehemiah 8.1-18 sets the context for the reading of God's Word, the response of the people and how understanding the Word impacted them. The Word of God never goes out in a vacuum. It always accomplishes that which it purposed itself to achieve. The Law was the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) believed to have been written by Moses. It is often referred to as the instruction manual of the people of Israel for how to be in good relationship with God.

Ezra as a scribe cared about the Word of God so it comes as no surprise that he is asked to read the Law of God to the people of God. He opened the Book of the Law and read from it.

For some six hours Ezra read the Word of God the understood what he read and responded in the affirmative with a resounding Amen! Amen! (Neh. 8.3, 5-6). When the Word of God is spoken and people understand they respond with Amen. The second

thing people do upon hearing the word of God is to worship, by lifting up holy hands unto God. Then they respond in worship by bowing down to the Lord in humble submission and supplication. This is how the spirit of God works in people when they hear the Word of God. The people took the Word of God seriously, so they gathered from dawn to hear it spoken. They were willing to put aside all they had to do to listen the Word. The people know what the Word of God is capable of doing in their lives so they made the sacrifices to listen to it. They know it is life. They know the transformative power it has because they hear it being preached to them. Imagine what the people did to ensure they hear the Word in such a manner that nothing stand in the way as a distraction: “Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion.” (Neh. 8.4 NIV) They wanted all who gathered to hear the Word of God.

In the researcher’s ministry as a District Superintendent in the United Methodist Church of Liberia, he has seen poverty-stricken people come together to use whatever meager they have to single-handedly construct places of worship without any external financial support for the sole purpose to hear God word. When they hear God’s word they go out and proclaim it to others. Ezra makes emphasis on understanding the word. When the word is heard and not understood it make little or no impact at all. Nehemiah 8:7-8 reads:

“The Levites (Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah), instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.” (NIV)

How can the people adequately respond to God's word if the word is not conveyed to them in clear and simple way? This is exactly what the priest Ezra did.

Like rural pastors would do, the Levites were instrumental in helping the people understand the word of God. For how can people understand the word of God to apply it to their life if they do not understand it clearly? Preachers today are given the task of teaching and proclaiming the word of God to God's people in simple ways. The Levites were committed to this task. They did not make a show of how much education they had and or eloquent they were to impress the people. It was all about preaching the word of God.

It was important and it remains important even today for the people of God to always be instructed in understanding God's word because God is spiritual and everything about God remains spiritual. For humans to understand spiritual things requires some kind of teaching of scripture and this is why it became very important for Ezra to read aloud the Law of God to the people and for the reading to be followed by further teachings by the Levites. The implication here for rural pastors is that they are to preach and teach the word of God to God's people so that they understand it and then teach it to their congregations, of course beginning with their household. Rural pastors are to discern what the scriptures say through prayers and other means so that they are prepared to teach others.

Understanding God's word is equally important because it comes to us today from different context, place, time, cultural, religious, social, economic, political, and also from circumstances quite different from ours today. So, it is imperative that those who

preach and teach God's word today first understand it well so that they are able to teach it to others. Perhaps another reason why God's people need help in understanding the word of God is that we are slow in understanding and comprehending spiritual matters as they are contained in the Law of God.

### **Impact of Ezra's Reading of the Law**

When the people heard the words of the Law of God as spoken by Ezra, they all wept and mourn. But the people were encouraged not to weep but to be happy (Neh. 8.9-10 NIV).

A commentary on Nehemiah suggests that the reaction of the people to weep and mourn upon hearing the Law of God was probably due to them reflecting on their guilt for failing to observe the law perfectly. (Ralph W. Klein, 801) This was the same reaction of Josiah when he heard the word of the Law: "When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes." (II Kings 22.11; II Chron. 34.19 NIV). The people were weeping and mourning. Ezra asked the people to celebrate by eating the fat portions and by drinking sweet drinks. This celebration is centered on God's knowledge of humans' inadequacy and their need for grace and mercy. So, understanding the Law of God should be reason to be glad because "the joy of the Lord is their strength" (Neh. 8.10b NIV)

All the people selected to rejoice because the "joy of the Lord is their strength." In other words, they were affirming that there is joy in knowing and understanding the Law of God. When they heard the Law of God they understood it and so went away rejoicing. When people hear God's words it convicts them, and they go home rejoicing. This is

what the word of God ought to accomplish each time it is proclaimed to the people of God.

### **Jeremiah Speaks for God**

The central message of Jeremiah was a message calling his fellow countrymen to turn away from the worship of lifeless gods to worship the God of their ancestors. It was a message of repentance, calling on Israel and Judah to turn from their wicked ways and serve God. (Jer.3.12-18). This call of repentance from Jeremiah was contingent specifically on two sins the people of Israel committed. Jeremiah 2.13 reads: “For my people have committed two sins: they have turned away from me, the spring of fresh water, and they have dug cisterns, cracked cisterns that can hold water no more.” (Good News).

Jeremiah pronounced judgment on the people of his time due to their wickedness. His message pointed to their false worship and their failure to trust God when faced with a national catastrophe. He also spoke out against injustices in the land. It was a message to the Jews in exile, aimed at helping them come to grips with the reality their exiled state was a result of their unwillingness to submit to God in worship and service. Jeremiah proclaimed to the nation of Judah that it would suffer foreign conquest, famine, captivity in the land of strangers and also plunder. (*The New Interpreter's Study Bible, NRSV*)

Jeremiah saw that Israel had become apostate: “They obeyed not, nor inclined their ear, but walked everyone in the stubbornness of their evil heart.” (Jer. 11.8; 31-32).

Above all, Jeremiah was a preaching prophet, proclaiming the Word throughout Israel, condemning idolatry, the greed of the priests and false prophets. Jeremiah's message was one of “tearing down” and “building up” (Jer. 1.10 NIV).

True prophets are always faced with difficult tasks. Pastors today ought to know the preaching ministry and the prophetic office have their foundation in the prophetic office of the Old Testament. God's call upon the lives of men and women continues unabated. Like Jeremiah, rural pastors are called to preach the Word of God to God's people so that their hearts are renewed and turned toward God.

### **Faith Comes from Proclamation**

To have faith in God one must first hear the Word of God and understand it. How can people respond to God's word if they have not heard it preached to them? Faithful preaching of the Word is critical if people are to respond to it. This is the argument Paul makes in his letter to the church in Rome:

“But how can they call on the one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in the one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those bring good news! But not all have obeyed the good news; Isaiah says, Lord, who has believed our message? So, faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” (Rom. 10.14-17 NRSV)

In Paul's letter to the church in Rome, he seems not to understand why the Jewish people have not accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was concerned to know whether they had not heard the gospel being proclaimed to them. Therefore, he speaks how important the role of the preacher is, the one who speaks on behalf of God to God's

people. Faith, Paul argues, “comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” Here the “word of Christ” could mean proclamation about Christ and not necessarily the words from Christ himself. This verse is closely related to what Paul says in Romans 1:16: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (NRSV).

For people to be able to respond to God’s word it must be spoken. Those who are the speak the word of God today are preachers. As they speak God’s word to the people of God, they too must know and understand God’s word so that they are able to proclaim it effectively. In other words, faithful proclamation of the word of God is essential if people are to positively respond to the Word when it is proclaimed to them.

As rural pastors receive training on how to preach sermons that are properly exegeted, biblically based, theologically sound and hermeneutically excellent, they will be in a better position to proclaim the Word of God in ways that people lives are changed for the better. This is the essence of preaching God’s word.

### **Jesus Christ of Nazareth**

In Isaiah it is prophesied that Jesus was coming to save His people from their sins: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with

justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.” (Isa. 9.6-7 NIV)

In his commentary, Matthew Henry raised the question regarding who was to undertake and accomplish these great things for the church. Isaiah the prophet tells us (v. 6, 7) they shall be done by the Messiah, *Immanuel*, the son of a virgin whose birth he had foretold (Isa. 7.14). The prophetic mission of Jesus was foretold by the prophet Isaiah. It sets the pace for the ministry of Jesus in a broken world:

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion, to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.” (Isa. 61.1-3 NIV)

Like many Old Testament prophets before Him, Jesus was prophetic in his deeds and actions. The birth of Jesus announced the coming of a new religious and political order. Herod was concerned that his political base has come under serious attack with the announcement that a new king has been born to the Jews (Matt. 2.16-23).

The birth of Jesus suggests the dismantling of the old order. In his classic *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann writes:

“Jesus criticized the royal consciousness; he dismantled and nullified the dominant culture; he identified with the marginalized and prepared to face the risk

of identifying with the vulnerable people in a politically charged context. Jesus birth itself represents criticism of the dominant consciousness. Indeed, the news about his birth signals the emergence of an alternative consciousness.” (81)

Brueggemann further suggests that the rage of King Herod, like many dictatorial leaders in the world is presented as a last attempt to hold on to power. Like many dictatorial leaders would do. Herod orders that all boys in Bethlehem and its surrounding two years old and under should be killed.

After the death of King Herod an angel told Joseph to take the child (Jesus) back of Israel in Galilee. (Matt. 2.19) Jesus is presented as the new king (Matt. 2.11) Brueggemann asserts that the birth of Jesus brings a harsh end to a Herodian reality that seem ordained forever, and it created a new historical situation for marginal people that none in their despair could have anticipated (*Prophetic Imagination* 84).

In Mark 1.15 Jesus announces a new day and a new dispensation: “The time has come the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” Because of his prophetic stance on many issues of his day, Jesus ran into problem with the political and religious leaders of his day. When he healed on the Sabbath Day, Jesus was accused of breaking the Jewish law which forbids working on the Sabbath and his actions evoked a conspiracy to have him killed (Mark 3.1-6).

Jesus was a political activist and a revolutionary. He was accused of crossing boundaries when he attended to the wounded and those afflicted with all kinds of incurable diseases. Jesus’s association with women in public, especially women who were not of his kin, was seen as a breach of ethics in the first century and thus caused problems for him. Jesus

even made things worse when he allowed a woman who was regarded as a sinner and a societal outcast to touch him. Giving an account of this incident Luke records:

“When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears than she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.” (Luke 7.36-38 NIV)

Jesus was always seen to be in the wrong by folks whose interest was to maintain the status quo. Everywhere Jesus went he was doing good. People in mainstream society who kept people at the margins saw Jesus as a threat to their survivability. By nature, Jesus was humbled even unto death. On many occasions, He touched the lives of those possessed with unclean spirits and demanded they get out and certainly the demon left those Jesus commended the demons leave. He had come not only for saints but to engaged sinners with the aim of turning them around for the Kingdom of God.

Those under the judgment of God were also touched by Jesus, including a blind man (Mark 2. 1-12: 7. 24-30, John 9.1).

Jesus had extraordinary power to do the unimaginable. This is similar to the story of Elijah. God sent the prophet Elijah to a widow living in Zarephath who was to take care of him. The widow only son died while Elijah was still with her. She was devastated and blamed Elijah for the death of her son on account of her sins: “Man of God, why did you do this to me? Did you come here to remind God of my sins and to cause my son’s death?” (I Kings 17.18). But after a while, Elijah, evoking the power of God restored the

widow's son back to life. In a joyous mood the widow affirmed the glory and power of God through Elijah: "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the Lord really speaks through you." (I Kings 17:24)

Those who speak God's word on behalf of God are recognized by their good deeds. They trust God and depend upon God to do mighty things in the name of God. Those who Jesus encountered never remained the same. Their life situations were changed for the better. He did not allow societal restrictions to hinder him from performing acts of good will and changing the lives of ordinary people. When Jesus met the woman at the well, she asked him a life transforming water so that she would have no need coming several times for water. During her conversation with Jesus, she received him as Lord and Savior and was never the same and many Samaritans believed on account of the woman's testimony. (John 4.39).

### **The Ministry of Paul**

In Paul's letter to the church in Rome, Paul makes it clear that both Jew and Gentiles are the same before God (Rom. 10.12-17). In the early part of Paul's letter to the church in Rome, Paul lays out his prophetic mission:

"Regarding his son, who as to his earthly life was a descendent of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ Our Lord. Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake." (Rom.1.4-5 NIV)

According to Paul, the promise is the same to all who call on the name of the Lord Jesus as the Son of God. The question is, how should people call on the Lord Jesus who had no encounter with him? It was necessary that the gospel should be preached to the Gentiles. Paul makes it clear that his mission was to preach the message of Christ crucified to the Gentiles. Concerning the Gentiles participating in God's redemptive plan for humanity, Paul wonders:

“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” (Rom. 10.14-15 NIV).

Paul's mission to the Gentiles cannot be overemphasized: “I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done.” (Rom. 15.18 NIV) Paul makes it clear that it was not his major responsibility to take the message of Christ crucified to the Jews, though he was often seen speaking in the synagogues where he was not very welcome with open arms (II Cor. 11.24-25). The earlier understanding of the covenant was that all would share in the covenant blessings by faith in the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

However, the point Paul makes is that for people to call on the name of the Lord they must first have faith. But to have faith one must hear about the Messiah and to hear about the Messiah one must first be told. The Messiah must be announced by a prophet or apostle. Paul argues further that for someone to announce the Messiah he or she must be

sent by God. It is God who sends people on errands and to speak on God's behalf. Paul's argument is that if people are to be saved what needs to happen is for God to 'send', to commission as 'apostles', people who will take the message to them. It is further noted that Paul understands the message concerning the servant of God to be the message about Jesus the Messiah. (Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, 667).

Like Moses, "Paul sees himself as embodying, in his mission, the prophetic task of announcing the Messiah to the world." (Keck, p.668) In announcing the message or the 'word' to the world involves the faculty of hearing, the act of hearing or listening, and the organ with which one hears, that is the ear, is the thing through which the word of God is heard, thus faith comes by hearing. Romans 10.17 reads: "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" while 10:8 reads: "But what does it say? The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim."

Keck asserts that if we put verse 17 alongside verse 8 the sequence of the message becomes clear that faith comes from the message, and the message occurs through "the word which is near you, the word that has come down from heaven and up from the depths of death, the word that is the Messiah himself, God's self-revelation, God's wisdom, Torah in person." (Keck, 668) Accordingly, Keck notes further, the chain of the sequence is the "word", the preaching of the "word", that is, preaching Jesus as Messiah and Lord, and "faith (Keck, 668).

The purpose of Paul's mission has been accomplished with success. Writing to the church in Rome Paul notes: "What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue

righteousness, have obtained it; a righteousness that is by faith; but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness have not attained their goal.” (Rom.

9.30-31 NIV) Hence, the Gentile world has heard the gospel. As Keck writes:

“Not all believed; but Gentiles who were not looking for the covenant membership have received it,

Israel, while embracing the Torah, which did indeed hold out the status of ‘righteousness’, the prospect of covenant membership, has not attained to that Torah.

Instead, Israel has to look on as outsiders come to share the blessings that had been promised, blessings to which they had looked forward for so long.” (669)

The fact that the Gentiles would one day share the blessings of God as it is with Israel completely unknown to the Israelites. Paul believes the people of Israel had been told long ago that this would happen. Paul writes: “Again, I ask: did Israel not understand? First Moses says, ‘I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.” (Rom.10.19 NIV)

Keck suggests “that Israel had long ago been warned that Gentiles would be coming to share, and even apparently to take over, the blessings they had been promised.” (669)

God has a way of engaging people who society considers nothing and transforming their nothingness into great things for God’s glory. This is the crux of the matter Paul is advancing, especially for those who speak God’s message to the people of God.

Preachers today ought to look for the good they are able to find in people and not always dwell on the bad side of them. Those who are called to speak for God need to understand this and not look down on people or give up too soon on people entrusted to their pastoral care. God did not give up on the Gentiles.

He made a way to be their God. What Paul seeks to achieve is to explain how the destiny of God's special people, the Israelites, and those who are considered outside of God's plan, are all tied together in the redemptive road map of God. Sharing his perspective about God's plan for the Gentiles, Keck writes: "It is the story of how people who had no airs and graces of their own, no thought of being sought by Israel's God, the creator, nevertheless found themselves grasped by the divine call and love as an act of sheer grace." (670).

When God calls people to speak on behalf of God to God's people something extraordinary happens. People's lives are changed; socio-economic and political situations are changed for the better. Political systems that once marginalized people witness new systems of justice and equity. Economic systems that created hardships for people are replaced with viable policies that see people living better lives. That is why God calls people to do God's business. The implication for rural pastors is that they are called at such a time to be God's spokespersons, to change lives, and to bring about hope in hopeless situations.

## **Theological Foundations**

### **Introduction**

The theological foundations are the framework within which training for rural pastors in Liberia takes place. This begins with the contextual understanding of God, God's activity in the world and God's relationship with humans, especially Liberians. With a clear understanding of who God is, and what God is doing among people, a second part of that foundation is the preacher's identity. This identity includes the preacher's role as

one who delivers God's Word, one who is a community spokesperson, a problem solver and a wounded healer. In addition to the nature of the preacher, the section will also consider literature addressing the preacher's function as the Voice of God and how he/she proceeds with the task of weekly homiletics. Facets of this function for consideration are the use of the lectionary, preaching apart from the lectionary, preaching for relevance, and the process from exegesis to sermon.

### **The Preacher's Identity and Responsibilities**

Whether the preachers are delivering the Gospel message in an urban or rural area, it is important for them to understand who they are and whose they are. This means a self-understanding is crucial to a preacher's function. It is also vital for the preacher to understand his/her community, and within that community to become a problem solver and a wounded healer.

### ***The One Who Delivers God's Word***

The minister is like a messenger of God, one who delivers communication to God's people. The predominant view about the preacher in the literature is one who is secondary as a vessel and conduit for God's Word. This means, as Knowles points out, that preaching is an impossible task without the approval of God who gives the message in the first place. Knowles insists that "Christian preaching at its most potent simply bears witness to the life-giving power of God" (xx). While it is true there are principles governing hermeneutics and homiletics, it is important for preachers to remember that "theological content and godly purpose are more pressing issues" (xxi). Quoting Saint Augustine, Knowles adds that preaching is a means to an end, a vehicle pointing the speaker and the hearers to God, our Creator and Savior. Knowles notes balancing the

employment of artful words, “all the while acknowledging the limitation of those words and thereby referring hearers to the sole prerogative of God as the one who bestows the life and healing of which the preacher speaks” (138-139).

Since preaching is the delivery of God’s message, the major source of a sermon is the Bible. Preaching is not just a preacher’s opinion of what he/she thinks about a given period or situation, it is God’s “charge from God” (Meyer, 13). Preachers continue a long tradition that began in biblical history with Moses who delivered God’s Word to Pharaoh. That same tradition continues today as preachers serve as stewards and heralds of “God’s Word in such a way that people encounter God through his word” (Meyer 21). As a steward, the preacher has to be a faithful manager and caretaker of God’s word. As a herald, the preacher proclaims God’s word as God intended for it to be heard, and as an opportunity to encounter God, the preacher passes the word to the people in a way that allows them to respond (Meyer 22).

In passing the Word of God to the people, the preacher testifies as a witness does in a court of law. This testimony is also bearing witness to the world about the Word of God. The preacher’s role as a witness bearing testimony requires accuracy in expounding on the Bible. This means every preacher need ought to have a personal experience and knowledge of God. This identity as a witness bearing testimony can expect efficacious results in sub-Sahara Africa, especially in Liberia because it is easy to trust the testimony of a legitimate witness.

A preacher who forgets he/she is a messenger of a message that did not originate from within them but from God, or who has ulterior motives for preaching, may preach what seem to be a sermon but lack the power of a sermon. A preacher is like an

ambassador who takes directives from his or her sending authority. Preachers are spokespersons of God. They represent God in the world. When they step to a pulpit to preach, they represent God and not their own interests. When they use the preaching moment to expound on their personal interests and agenda, they misrepresent God.

### *The Community's Spokesperson*

The preacher has a social reality and a historical context, a community from which they have been called out of and sent back to serve, especially in addressing “complex, conflicted, and urgent moral issues” (Schlafer, 94). The preacher does not exclude himself or herself from the problem or solution when it comes to issues confronting the community.

There is a paradoxical dimension of the role as spokesperson. While the Word from which the preacher delivers a sermon is authoritative, no matter what type of sermon the preacher delivers, the community is an inextricable part of it and as such, must not sound authoritative on his/her own, especially when it comes to morals. Instead, the preacher functions “as moral community spokesperson...mentor...and perhaps even as adjudicator...for a community of faith” (Graves, Schlafer, & Lowry 195).

The role of the preacher as a community spokesperson is particularly true for the African American community, according to Roberts and Yamane (318). The authors traced this phenomenon back to the days of African enslavement in the United States when “the role of plantation preacher was often the only leadership role afforded southern blacks,” making the black church “the community center par excellence” (318). Like the plantation preacher, rural pastors are looked up to for leadership role in many areas of life. When there is conflict between husbands and wives, before family members

get involved, the preacher in the village takes the leadership role in conflict resolution. During the civil conflict in Liberia, when a rebel was about to execute anyone in a village, the village people would run to the preacher to intervene. In most cases, the rebel listened to the preacher.

The evolution of the preacher as the community spokesperson is more prominent in the African American community (see Gilbert, 127, Mitzi Smith, 59; and Thomas, ix). However, Heywood (2011) acknowledges the preacher has a prophetic role in calling attention to moral decay and other social ills in the larger society.

### ***The Problem Solver***

It is unusual to think of a preacher as a problem solver because it is considered “an old model of pastor as someone with expert knowledge” through “the expert and dummy model” (Dinkis, 31). This is because no one can change another person. People can only change themselves. The pastor or preacher who leans toward giving advice will soon be led into the temptation abusing “the power of a pastoral relationship” (Dinkis 32). For his part, Willimon embraced the description of the preacher as a problem solver within the context of conflict management in the church. Identifying the role of problem solver as one of five leadership styles, the author described him/her as one who keep “pressing for conversation and negotiation of the conflict until its satisfactory conclusion is reached” (Willimon 28). There are strengths and weaknesses in this approach which the author recognizes.

A study done among African pastors in New York revealed they play the role of spiritual director, agents of healing, builders of institutions, and cultural intermediaries,

with the function as problem solver being attached to the role of a spiritual director (Gornik, 70-71). The role of the African pastor as a problem solver is rooted in the belief many Africans have of the universe, that the spiritual world overlaps with the material world where “failures, sickness, fortunes, and misfortunes are causally linked to a wide range of social conditions via gods” (Gornik 72). Since pastors represent Jesus, who is viewed as a problem solver, they are perceived as being closer to Jesus and have greater access to His spiritual powers (Ezigbo 296). Rural pastors in Liberia are especially reflective of the role as problem solvers who possess spiritual powers to counter evil forces and fight against the devil who wreaks havoc on the lives of believers.

### ***The Wounded Healer***

This concept was popularized by Henri Nouwen in a book titled, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*. The immediate and larger contexts of ministry is fragmented, suffering and broken, and it is to that world that the minister, who is also wounded as a part of suffering humanity, “must first look after his own wounds but at the same time be prepared to heal the wounds of others” (Nouwen 82). The minister is wounded and become the healer at the same time, most likely because by his wounds such as loneliness, there is a deep understanding of what being wounded means and empowers the minister to heal others (88).

Wendell J. Davis in a book titled *Healing a Wounded Leader: The Methods of Healing a Wounded* has a different focus in that the spotlight is on the methods which can be employed to help leaders who have been wounded become healed so that they become more effective preachers (Davis, 2013). After identifying the specific wounds and the

sources of those wounds such as the socialization process and the consequences they produce in people, Davis specifies, among other things, prayers (35) and the cultivating of values for emotional stability (40-41). Davis's assertion resonates with me so well. I recalled in 2011 when my wife died, I was terribly wounded inside for several months. I was sore emotionally and psychologically but that did not stop members of my congregation from constantly engaging me with their own issues with the aim of praying for and with them. I recalled one specific incident that I became so upset, I must admit, that I had to decline attending to a call I believed at the time was very urgent.

### **Medium of the Spirit**

In the African context, the preacher is often seen as the medium between the spirit world and humans. *In Preaching in the African Context: Why We Preach*, Bishop Eben K. Nhwatiwa, using the Shona culture as a context writes:

“The central image of the preacher is a spirit medium who brings the message of those above in the air or wind, *vari mumhepo*, to those in the community of mortals. The ultimate big spirit is *Mwari*, God, the creator, to whom ancestors take their concerns and also from whom the final word is passed on to the spirit medium.” (58)

Nhwatiwa argues further that if the preacher in African contexts is seen as a medium of the spirit it means that the preacher must possess the spirit of Mwari, God, the creator that will enable him or her to preach. He asserts that “What the preacher does is no longer from him/her but from the spirit in that individual.” (58). From the African perspective,

ancestors play the role of interceding for the people before God and it is within this context of understanding that the preacher as a spirit medium ought to be understood. According to Nhiwatiwa, “The only difference is that during the delivery of the sermon it is God advocating His case before the people. God, the spirit, possesses the preacher, the medium, and communicates the message to the people.” (59) Nhiwatiwa’s insight about the preacher being the medium of the spirit resonates well because often time those who believe and practice African Traditional religion would go to the preacher for help if he or she fails in meeting the spiritual needs of his followers. They would come to the preacher to help them pray, for example, for the healing of a member who is not getting well from an illness after all attempts by them fail.

### **The UMC Quadrilateral**

Scripture is at the heart of ministry. The United Methodist Church recognizes Scripture as one of four “sides” of the “quadrilateral, the other three being “(2) tradition, (3) reason, and (4) experience” (“Quadrilateral”). Although the quadrilateral has four sides, the UMC has clarified that “Scripture is considered the primary source and standard for Christian doctrine” (“Quadrilateral”). Two subthemes related to biblical foundation in rural pastors training are teaching as a biblical mandate and biblical literacy.

No matter where Christianity finds itself, Scripture should remain the primary source for developing sound theology. Kwame Bediako points out the value of Scripture for African pastors by describing it as “a prism” through which the culture passes for a new understanding, “a record of God’s engagement with culture,” “a road map,” “our

history,” and “the basis of our identity” (2). Just as the Hebrew people saw God actively at work among them, so African pastors, even those in rural areas, can teach their congregants to see God at work in their life events.

According to Moorehead,

“God created His church to grow. He designed it to grow. He equipped it to grow.

And the church indeed flourished. On the first day of the church's existence 3000 people were baptized (Acts 2:41). From 3000 the church grew to 5000 (Acts 4:4).

This trend of multiplication shows that the primary task of making disciples for the transformation of the world was for the church to grow in all parts of the world. Notwithstanding, some people are turned off by the talk of "numbers."

They somehow feel that to talk of numbers is unspiritual. God believed in numbers. He names a book in the Old Testament Numbers (104).

### **Scripture**

Scriptures are taught and rural pastors are encouraged to memorize Bible verses and passages so as to prove themselves worthy of their calling. The little theological training they acquired through pastoral training programs conducted by the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Liberia Annual Conference qualifies them for ministry without going through a formal theological training in the understanding of homiletics and hermeneutics. This is certainly not very helpful for those entrusted with proclaiming and handling the Word of God.

## **Tradition**

Whenever the word “rural pastor” is mentioned in the Liberian context there are two things that come to mind immediately. First, they are pastors serving in rural contexts or in towns and villages without formal theological training but who have proven and demonstrated a genuine call to ministry. Second, these pastors believe that the Holy Spirit is capable of teaching them. However, any formal training is also critical and necessary to equip them to become better pastors in their ministerial practices. Tradition is a part of culture that is passed from person to person or generation to generation, possibly differing in detail from family to family, such as the way to celebrate holidays or simply understood as commonly held system like any type of doctrine. Speaking about tradition, Teresa Brown in her book *Delivering the Sermon* asserts that “To a great degree one’s ethnicity, nationality, culture, region, district, class and gender defines one’s manner of speaking” (52)

Brown catalogs the different ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds rural pastors emerged from that often have bearing on ministry. This is similar issue Anna Carter Florence alluded to in her book *Preaching as Testimony* when she argued that “I like how they teach us (tradition) to listen carefully and look below the surface, to honor courage and respect pain, to laugh at ourselves and face up to hard truths, to cherish and question and not give up until we find the thread of grace” (59). Rural pastors are noted for capturing the attention of their audiences with stories and tedious spiritual stories handed down from generation to generation in the name of fulfilling some form of biblical practices. When rural pastors are not properly trained, they introduced practices in their ministry they learned from their cultural traditions. For example, in some traditional

practices in Liberia, males are to be loved and respected by all, even when they do not deserve such love and respect by the very way they conduct their lives. However, in the Christian tradition, a person is offered unconditional love through grace and divine sacrifice.

Thomas G. Long asserts that “the preacher is not to replicate the biblical text but to regenerate some portion of the text” (76). Such preachers see themselves as above the rules and norms of their community or society and entitled to special treatment or a secret life outside of the persona, and this person creates the persona or false self to hide his vulnerability and fearfulness. The duty of evangelism and discipleship has been around for centuries. Ronald D. Sisk argues that some congregations hold on to traditions that were passed on to them which they believe ought to be maintained by pastors when assigned to their congregations. Sisk writes: “the members hated new ideas and hated ‘uppity’ young seminarians who were always trying to inflict new ideas upon them” (45)

### **Reason**

When Jesus knew that his time on earth was coming to an end, He gave instructions to his disciples to continue His ministry with these words: “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commended you. Look, I will be with you every day until the end of this present age”. (Matt. 28.19-20, Daily Companion Bible). This passage is foundational to what this project seeks to accomplish because it lays the basis for why it is important to train rural pastors by first reasoning with them about the need to carry out a particular task with precision and determination. Jesus knew his disciples were to go into unfamiliar terrains and they needed to be

equipped in order to carry out His mission and vision. Having been equipped with the Holy Spirit, Jesus commanded them to go and make disciples.

Endowment of the Holy Spirit was critical for Jesus's disciples. It served as a source of empowerment for the task of propagating the Gospel (Acts 2). However, this endowment from the Holy Spirit may not be enough as a sure guarantee for disciple-making. In what is referred to as the Great Commission, Jesus was clear to His disciples for them to make disciples of all nations. It is this teaching mandate Jesus emphasized that this research seeks to accomplish. Some people hold the view that once a believer is filled with the Holy Spirit, whatever that notion of being filled with the Holy Spirit is there is no need for further training. Others go to the extent to say that seminary education is a waste of time that often corrupts the mind and soul. Just because a pastor is filled with the Holy Spirit does not remove the benefits of specialized training for specific ministry. This is true for rural pastors trained in preaching, evangelism, and discipleship in Liberia.

### **Experience**

The word experience connotes mentoring, apprenticeship, a step-by-step torturing; in some case during the process of torturing each day task poses challenges and requires some sort of experience which could lead to failure at a point, new discovery at another point, or improvement in what is learned on a regular basis. Some say experience is the best teacher.

### **The Priesthood of All Believers**

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, states that all those who believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ share the priestly status of Jesus. As such, there is no need for any priest to intercede on their behalf. Quoting Everett Ferguson in his book *Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty-First Century*, Robert A. Muthiah asserts that the “priesthood of all believers came to mean that individuals can approach God without a mediator; individuals can interpret Scriptures for themselves, and anyone can preside at worship.” (8)

This doctrine argues that there is no longer the need for a special priestly class of people with a special privilege among the people of God. All Christians share Christ’s priestly status and role because they are in union with Christ. In the Old Testament there was a special group of priests who serve as mediators of the people of Israel before God.

However, by His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus becomes the new high priest. There is no longer a dividing wall between God and God’s people. Scripture affirms that Jesus is the great high priest. Hebrew 4.14-16 states:

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” (NIV)

According to the Jewish tradition, the main function of the priest was to offer sacrifice on behalf of the people. As seen in Leviticus 16, Aaron, Israel’s first high priest had to offer

sacrifices to God for the sin of the people. He would take a bull to cleanse himself and later took the same blood in the holy of holies and sprinkled its blood on the alter. He had to take another goat to confess Israel's sin over it and then send it into the wilderness. This was done so that the goat took on itself the sins of the people as it is sent away in the wilderness (Lev. 16.1-22).

There were prophecies by Old Testament prophets that pointed to the fact that Jesus would be the ultimate savior of the world. This plan would require that the people of Israel look no longer to the blood of cows and goats but to the blood-stained banner of true High Priest, Jesus Christ. Jesus would bear the pain, suffering and humiliation for the sins of humanity. No more scapegoating. Jesus would endure the suffering that should have been for humanity, the pain that humanity should have borne.

All the while we thought that his suffering was punishment sent by God. But because of our sins he was wounded, beaten because of the evil we did. We are healed by the punishment he suffered, made whole by the blows he received. God's redemptive plan for humanity is no longer by means of blood of cows and goats but by the blood-stained banner of Jesus Christ. By this action Jesus takes on, once and for all, the role of being the sacrificial lamb and high priest. So, the theology of the priesthood of all believers has a serious implication for those who today call themselves Christians, especially persons who avail themselves to the call of full-time ministry.

It also has significant implication for lay pastors who often view the priestly role as one exclusively reserved for those who are set aside and ordained in full-time pastoral ministry. All believers share the priestly office of Jesus because they too "are the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the

wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvelous light.” (I Pet. 2.9 Good News Version). Jesus made his priestly office available to all Christians through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

By the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the ordained clergy still have several exclusive rights and privileges. For example, in the United Methodist tradition, ordained elders have certain privileges that lay persons do not enjoy. I remember as a teenager, I served as superintendent of the Sunday School program of my local church. Though not ordained at the time, I play the role of supervising the Bible study program of the church, especially every Wednesday evening and prior to worship each Sunday. I was not a clergy but called to be in ministry.

As Muthiah writes, “Ministry is shared among all the people; the redemptive work of Christ carried through the church does not rest solely on the pastor but the gathered community of faith under the Lordship of Christ.” (175)

The concept of the priesthood of all believers has important implication for rural pastors. It implies that they will be trained and equipped for ministry in specific area of preaching the ‘Word of God’ in rural contexts. This is the essence of the priesthood of all believers. But what is the ‘Word of God’ that is to be preached by rural pastors in rural contexts?

### **The Ministry of Prophetic Preaching**

For rural pastors who are to be trained to preach sermons that are properly exegeted, biblically based, theologically sound and homiletically excellent, the need to understand the nature and impact of the prophetic office and prophetic ministry cannot be overemphasized. But what is prophetic sermon? A Prophetic sermon is one that

challenges a person's consciousness for an alternative consciousness. A prophetic sermon presents and places Jesus Christ at the center of the message that is proclaimed. Any sermon that is not centered on Jesus is not prophetic in nature and content.

Prophetic sermons challenge the status quo and seeks to bring about a new order based on truth speaking, especially speaking truth to powers, a call for justice, and respect for the human person. Any sermon that fails to address these critical issues of one's day may sound prophetic but lacks what it means to be prophetic.

So, what then is prophetic preaching? According to Michael Quicke, Prophetic preaching is about the 'togetherness' of divine reality when Christian preachers respond to scripture as Old Testament prophets did when they heard the word of the Lord. When prophets declared, "Listen to the word of the Lord." They had a conviction that God had spoken and was now present, expressing Himself through the prophet's words. (kindle loc. 123)

Quicke goes on to argue that prophetic preaching is also the "Word of God which God has spoken; but God makes use, according to His good and pleasure, of the ministry of man who speaks to his fellow men, in God's name by means of a message of scripture." (quote from Karl Barth, kindle loc. 171).

For Quicke, preaching is nothing less than sharing the in-breaking of God's good news to create new people in new community. Quicke notes further that it is a biblical/listening/seeing/doing event that God empowers to form Christ-shaped people and communities. (kindle loc. 209).

Quicke also insists that what makes a preaching event prophetic is that it is a Father event, a Christ event, and a Spirit event, or else it is merely resounding gongs or clanging

cymbals. (kindle loc. 532). He argues that not every proclamation is prophetic in nature. Often time preachers mount the pulpit and all they do for most part of the preaching event is to boast about themselves. Quicke is right that preaching is different because it has the audacity to ask people to live as though they had to report to God at any moment. It dares to remind hearers of their tentative state and the transiency of life. (kindle loc. 232).

When pastors ascend the pulpit to preach it is all about making known to the world the Word of God. It is about making the Gospel message come alive in such a way as if the preacher has reached the moment to let God know that as messengers of God they are aware of the temporal nature of humanity, and that all they need to do while they have life is to be in love with God and their fellow humans. This is the essence of prophetic preaching.

Quicke's perspective is deeply rooted in God's call upon the lives of persons called to be spokespersons for God. Prophetic preaching is about being the spokesperson for those who cannot speak for themselves, or better still for those who live in fear for their lives if they speak out against injustice.

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale in *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* puts it right. Tisdale quotes Cornel West to define prophetic preaching as:

“human acts of justice and kindness that attend to the unjust sources of human hurt and misery. Prophetic witness calls attention to the causes of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery. It highlights personal and institutional evil including the evil of being indifferent to personal and institutional evil.” (8)

For Walter Brueggemann, prophetic preaching is a clear and dramatic embodiment of the way in which the tradition is layered with the thick voicing of God who keeps uttering, even in the face of determined royal silencing of such speech. (*The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*: kindle loc. 638)

David Ward on the other hand views preaching in the context of its practice. In *Practicing the Preaching Life*, Ward asserts that preaching is a practice and notes that the “aim, functions, external verses internal goods, and virtues” are “the most common characteristics of practices that persist in any context.” (2). According to Ward, internal goods are part and parcel of the practice itself which are made possible by practicing the preaching event over a period of time. When practice is done well the benefits of preaching will be manifested. In other words, when the practice of preaching is done well good things will happen automatically (Ward, 4). Ward writes:

“The opportunity to give witness to the goodness of God is an internal good; the preacher’s national reputation is not. The enjoyment of God through the worshipful description of God’s character is an internal good; the building of a larger church is not. The internal goods are in an intrinsic way.” (4)

The point Ward makes here is that it is in practice that the event of preaching accomplishes its goal of transforming the world. Ward does not in any way insinuate that there is anything wrong with living big as a result of being a good preacher. They are external goods: the paycheck, the reputation of being a good preacher. Ward argues that external goods are:

“those goods that are attached to practices from the outside by social convention or social accident. Salaries, positions, bonuses, products held in hand, winning or losing, status, prestige, or power are all external goods. External goods can degrade a practice when the practice is pursued primarily for their sake.” (4)

Ward’s argument that external goods ought not to be the sole purpose of preaching resonates with the researcher. While it is good to receive some remuneration at the end of a preaching moment, especially when invited outside of one’s assigned congregation to do so, when external benefits drive the purpose of preaching, the essence of preaching is undermined and call to question. In advancing this argument, Ward writes: “Preachers do well to always remember that a salary is an external good (therefore not the focus) but still good (therefore not to be demeaned, dismissed, or denied).” (5) Preachers are called to be in the business of preaching, of proclaiming the Good News of the saving grace of Jesus Christ. This is their calling. In the process of doing that there may be along the way ‘external goods’ or benefits but that is not what preaching is all about. Ward puts it best when he insists that “it is best when external goods serve internal goods but do not become the primary motive.” (5)

Another very important perspective of Ward in his attempt to define preaching in the context of practice is virtue. Quoting Alasdair MacIntyre, Ward defines virtue as:

“an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practice and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods...The ultimate aim of preaching must be something that benefits the world, not only the church.” (qtd.

In Ward 6-7)

The content of the character of the preacher has a significant bearing on preaching. How can a preaching moment make sense on Sunday morning when the one doing the preaching was the very one saw lying down in a gutter as a result of intoxication? Some preacher say “Do what I say but don’t do what you see me do.” This makes little sense. The preaching life demands that the preacher’s life ought to be consistent with the Gospel message, nothing more, nothing less.

Ward is therefore right that “the preaching life, the life of the congregation, and the life of the world that is always in view for good preaching, not merely the production of a single sermon.” (8-9)

In *Delivering the Sermon*, Teresa L. Fry Brown defines preaching as “an oral medium for sharing faith-centered messages. Preaching is informational and dialogical, melding the call and response of preacher and congregant.” (6) According to Brown, the preaching event is like a system of communication involving a sender, the message and the receiver that is part of a communication framework. Brown writes that the “sender initiates the communication, understanding that the receiver is ready to listen. The congregant trusts the preacher to impact information without force, manipulation, prejudice, or offense.”

(6)

This kind of communication loop makes sense for the preaching event. It calls the attention of the preacher to be aware of the role communication plays during the preaching moment.

Preachers must always know that the purpose of preaching is to lead people heaven-ward and to tell them, from time to time, about God’s love for humanity that led

God to incarnate in human form for the salvation of humanity. Preaching is a very serious matter. It is not for those who seek preaching to gain popularity. Some preachers say they aspire to be preachers so that they gain the needed popularity to enable them run for elective position in government. Folks who pursue the sacred vocation for such purpose miss the goal of the prophetic office and the purpose of prophetic calling. Brown writes:

“Preaching is an opportunity to use God’s gift of language to its fullest. Words affect the heart, soul, and mind. The preacher must be committed to oral communication, keeping words simple, clear, and appropriate. One must invite the listeners, both as individuals and as a community. The preacher must relay hope for change from present realities to future possibilities. The preacher must lead the community in celebration of what God has done, is doing, and will do in their lives.” (14)

When leading a congregation of illiterate and semi-illiterate members, a preacher should always be mindful when preaching to use language that they are capable of understanding. And often time, one can get the feeling that members are following them by their gestures such as nodding the head to affirm they understand or by the saying of a resounding amen.

In her classic *Preaching as Testimony*, Anna Carter Florence stresses that preaching can be viewed as testimony. Florence quotes Paul Ricoeur to define testimony “as the act of testifying to an event and reporting on what was seen or understood” (62). As an act of testimony, Florence continues, “testimony has two components: the one who testifies (the witness who has seen and who seeks to justify the report), and the one who hears the testimony (the one who has not seen but who hears the witness’s report and

forms an opinion about the testimony).” The researcher concurs with Ricoeur that “it is only in the hearing that we can decide if the testimony is true or false, because testimony involves a movement from seeing to understanding, and perhaps, believing.” (qtd. in Florence, 62)

When a preacher gets into the pulpit to preach what he does is to bear witness to an event and reports what he understands. The preacher is the one who testifies, that is, she is the one who has seen and who seeks to justify the report while the congregation make up those who have not seen but who hear the witness report and forms an opinion about the testimony. (Florence, 62) This insight about the meaning of preaching puts into perspective the role of the preacher on the one hand and the place of those who hear the message and form an opinion.

Some preachers develop the practice of asking their teenage children about what they hear from the preacher after worship. These preachers want to know how well their teenage children understand the message. This affirms the view of Ricoeur that viewed the sermon from the vantage point of a testimony, the art of preaching that involves the preacher testifying to what she hears from God and conveys that which is heard to a waiting congregation.

In Ricoeur’s understanding of the preaching moment, the witness, who for our purpose is the preacher, is not just anyone but one who is usually set aside, anointed and sent by God to bear witness for God. In preaching, the witness ultimately does not give testimony in a vacuum, but to the radical, global meaning of human experience, or in short, to God. (Florence, 63 Paraphrased). To give preaching as testimony its prophetic voice, Ricoeur argues further that the testimony is proclamation for all people by a single

witness” and usually that witness is the preacher who is chosen from within the congregation, set aside, trained, empowered by the anointing of the Holy Spirit and ordained by the church to preach the Word of God.

Like it was with Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles, testimony is prophetic in nature because it “calls for a total engagement of the words and acts, even at the cost of the life of the witness.” (Florence, 63).

For the purpose of this project, prophetic is defined as preaching that challenges an existing status quo and often speaks truth to power. To be prophetic in proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ is to live dangerously. Often, those who hear the message have itchy ears and want to hear what suits their individual whims and caprices and will do anything to demonize one who challenges them to take on a course in life that leads to eternal life.

Prophetic preaching is preaching about real life issues that confront those who live and survive at the margins of society. Prophetic preaching demands that justice be done to all regardless of one’s socio-economic, political, ethnic/tribal or religious affiliation. Prophetic preaching calls for boldness, authenticity, and clarity. Prophetic preaching puts Jesus at the center of the message.

## **The Nature of Prophetic Preaching**

### **Introduction**

In her book *Prophetic Preaching: A pastoral Approach*, Leonora Tubbs Tisdale notes there are several hallmarks of prophetic preaching which sets the context and basis for the nature of prophetic preaching. According to her:

“Prophetic preaching is rooted in the biblical witness: both in the testimony of the Hebrew prophets of old and in the words and deeds of the prophet Jesus of Nazareth and that it is counter-cultural and challenges the status quo. She goes on to say that prophetic preaching is concerned not only with the evils and shortcomings of the present social order and often more focused on the corporate or public issues than on individuals and personal concerns, but also requires the preacher to name both what is not of God in the world (criticizing) and the new reality God will bring to pass in the future (energizing).” (Tisdale, 9)

The most striking of Tisdale’s perspective on the nature of prophetic proclamation is that it requires of the preacher a heart that breaks with the things that break God’s heart; a passion for justice in the world; the imagination, conviction, and courage to speak words from God; humility and honesty in the preaching moment; and a story reliance on the presence of and power of the Holy Spirit. (Tisdale, 9-10).

Without a heart that breaks with the things that breaks the heart of God a preacher ceases to be prophetic in his proclamation. Micah 6:8 reads: “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and walk humbly with God?” (KJV). Believers are called to do justice and walk humbly with God. This call for justice puts greater responsibility on those who serve as mouthpiece for God; those who stand before the congregation to proclaim what they have heard from God. In other words, preachers are to lead by example.

Christ led by example and those who proclaim Christ’s message must live as Christ lived: a life of openness, bravery, authenticity, love for humanity, and justice. It is

not an overstatement to say that prophetic preaching is a dangerous affair; it can sometimes cost preachers their lives. As Tisdale writes, “Prophetic witness can be costly. Yet this very costliness also makes it part and parcel of the gospel Jesus came preaching: a gospel that repeatedly reminds us that it is only as we lose our lives for the gospel’s sake that we find them.” (90) Many rural pastors in Liberia will easily understand this reality. They are often confronted with traditional religious practices that are hostile to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Having set the context for the nature of prophetic preaching, what are some of the critical steps that lead to prophetic preaching?

### **Preparing to Preach**

From the earliest moments in the history of the church when the apostles and fellow believers gathered on the first day of the week to break bread as evidenced in Acts 20.7, Sunday morning gradually became a traditional day of worship for majority of Christendom. During this time, the church, comes together as an assembly of the community of faith when the preacher proclaims the Word of God to the congregation. However, long before the gathering, the preacher has to make preparations for this pivotal event. The preacher must decide which text to utilize, whether to employ the lectionary, how to interact with the Bible. Then the preacher must write the sermon, deliver it and react to how the people respond to the preaching. The literature in this section will address these themes and sub-themes.

Ronald D. Sisk in *Preaching Ethically: Being True to the Gospel, Your Congregation, and Yourself* states emphatically that:

“Prophetic preaching may be taken to mean advocating the interests of a particular minority or oppressed group over against the insensitivity or self-interest of the majority. Its purpose is to raise the consciousness of the church, to make people intensely and often uncomfortably aware of issues. Prophetic preaching defines an issue, cites a governing biblical text, and develops an argument out of that text” (111)

Prophetic preaching has led preachers in trouble. During the early days of military rule in Liberia under Master Sargent Samuel K. Doe, preachers like Bishop Michael Kpakala Francis of the Catholic Archdiocese of Monrovia, Bishop Arthur Flomo Kulah of the United Methodist Church of Liberia, and Bishop George Brown of the Episcopal Church of Liberia, all of whom criticized and condemned the infamous Decree 88A, were pursued by government for attempting to incite the people against the government. Decree 88A was promulgated by the military junta to censor free speech. Under this Decree, criticizing the government was a treasonable offense.

According to Elizabeth Achtemeier in her book *Preaching from The Old Testament*, Prophetic preaching deals with the hearts of the covenant people, and its goal is to awaken that faith in the congregation that will enable them to trust their Lord in all circumstances and to obey him with willing and grateful hearts.” (118-119) “Prophetic preaching” Achtemeier argues further, “consists not in exhortation alone but, first of all, in that proclamation of God’s gracious acts toward his covenant people that inspires them to respond to His love in reciprocal love, acted out of obedience.” (119) People often feel a sense of guilt and shame when they hear a sermon that is prophetic in nature. It

challenges their moral conscience to the wrong they are doing with a call to repent and change.

How does a preacher craft a prophetic sermon? Regardless of what form the sermon takes, its preparation requires serious time of engaging God in prayer, engaging the biblical text to hear from God, and knowing the target group for the sermon or the congregation. Several things come to play when crafting a prophetic sermon. Ronald D. Sisk says that crafting a sermon demands “Study! Study! Study!” He writes further that:

“It is essential that anyone who wants to preach on a controversial issue know the various positions that are commonly taken on the issue and why people hold these positions. It is essential that we know the applicable scriptures and how they may be variously interpreted. People will want to know that you have done your biblical homework.” (Sisk, 115-16)

Biblical exegesis is digging deeper into the text to understand its original meaning, history, and context so that when apply to contemporary situation, it makes sense to contemporary audience.

According to Thomas G. Long in *The Witness of Preaching*, “Exegesis is a systematic plan for coming to understand a biblical text.” Long argues that the “Whole aim of a preacher’s study of a biblical text is to hear in that text a specific word for us, and who are “we” happen to be at this moment makes a considerable difference in how the preacher approaches the text.” (69) Exegesis is the process of digging into the text and asking critical questions that come to mind. Preachers should always bear in mind that the text was written several years ago and evolved out of a specific context and often intended for a specific group of people.

This is precisely the point Frederick C. Tiffany and Sharon H. Ringe make in their book *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap*. Ringe and Tiffany write:

There are “three fundamental assumptions that govern our approach to reading the Bible: (1) that the text arises from particular social settings, (2) that the reader likewise reads from specific settings, and (3) that neither the diversity of the texts nor the multitude of readers stand in isolation one from another. We have also suggested that each reader or community of readers should begin the process by asking questions.” (18)

When the researcher begins the process of crafting a sermon, his first step is to engage the scriptures to hear what God is saying to him to convey to God’s people. Seminaries often give preachers skills to engage and ponder scriptures but the art of exegesis is more than just pondering scriptures. It is about asking tough questions about the text to make it relevant for their audience today.

### ***Deciding what to Preach: The Text and Theme***

Rzepka and Sawyer recognize that some occasions narrow the preacher’s choice of a text. These occasions, such as Christmas, Lent Easter, Pentecost or other church festivals, “provide an orderliness that many welcome” (30). When it comes to maintaining preaching order, the authors recommend developing a structure during their year for a sermon series. This includes, they write, “perhaps a month on social action themes, or a series on the basic tenets of one’s faith tradition” (30). One preacher suggests striving for balance in texts to address broad areas such as “denominational history, social action, science, world religions, ethics,” among others (Rzepka and

Sawyer 30). There is no doubt that rural Liberian pastors will find reasons to have such a broad array of topics. However, finding balance in biblical texts for preaching is equally necessary for the congregation to become familiar with the books of the Bible.

Deciding on a text requires some planning, according to Wayne McDill. One approach is by identifying the “text unit” to determine the writer’s “theme or topic” to discover the “structural boundaries of the text” (McDill 18). This strategy usually leads to sermons based on the text delivered in an expository style. When taking this approach, it is best to scrutinize or dissect the text to discover the meaning the writer intended for the audience (McDill 19). McDill also gives clear steps for the exegesis of the text to discover the writer’s meaning once the preacher has decided which one to use on a given Sunday.

### ***Lectionary and Non-lectionary Preaching***

One way of deciding which text to use is through the lectionary. The lectionary is a compilation of Scripture readings organized to fit specific events in the life of the church. One benefit of the lectionary is the discipline of preaching of texts that would ordinarily be ignored. There is a disadvantage, however, of repetitious use of texts and running the risk of being limited since certain texts are confined to a specific church season. The preacher should not be confined to the lectionary but become familiar enough with the Bible to find appropriate passages when necessary.

Thomas Campbell agrees that the lectionary has value because it serves to safeguard against the pastor promoting “a personal agenda...provides the pastor a systematic Bible study, and provides a sense of ecumenical unity that people of various denominations can follow” (196). Two limitations, however, are that the lectionary does

not address specific concerns local churches and local communities might have, and it does not allow the Holy Spirit to lead the pastor in choosing texts that are pertinent and relevant (196).

Thomas Bandy believes the purpose of the lectionary is to bring the entire congregation together. This list of assigned scripture passages guide church members to explore books of the Bible they would not ordinarily read and appreciate the unifying message (ch. 7). There are numerous other publications showing preachers how to make the best use of the lectionary such as Bartlett and Taylor's *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. John R. Brokhoff's *Lectionary Preaching Workbook* and Jessica M. Kelley's *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series: Thematic Plans for Years A, B, and C*. While some of the literature takes a how-to approach, there are some that are commentary on the lectionary texts. These include, but are not limited to, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship* (Green, Long, Powery, and Rigby,) and *Preaching the New Lectionary Year A* (Bergant and Fragomeni).

Thomas Long recommends the use of the lectionary because it "ensures that congregations will encounter the breadth of the biblical witness" yet cautions of their limitations where "many texts are omitted including some entire books of the Bible" (81). In the case of rural pastors who are illiterate or semi-literate, encouraging them to find texts suitable for season of the church year or to address specific concerns in the community will be valuable.

### *Preaching in Context*

Sermons are never delivered in a vacuum. Each time God speaks through a preacher, the message is addressed to a specific community at a particular time for a distinctive reason. Preaching is always done in context as the preacher hears what the people are experiencing in the church and the community. Being aware of the context in which a sermon is delivered is required in order to be relevant and engaging (Nieman 2008). Preaching connects the ancient past to the contemporary present and the preacher ought to be knowledgeable about both ends of the spectrum to appreciate what the Bible message meant for the first audience as well as for the current one (Nieman 6).

Between these two ends, there is God's relationship with both an ancient community of faith and the present one. This allows God to meet people "in the messiness and complexity of [their] lives" (Neiman 6). Nieman further addresses this framework for approaching context, offers tools to explore those contexts, suggests symbols to make sense of the contexts, and how preaching functions within given contexts. In similar ways, Craig G. Bartholomew (2016) wants preachers to be aware that there are two contexts which are the context of the Bible itself, and the context of the preacher (ch.1). Other literature focuses on various kinds of contexts like poverty (Pieterse), worship (Greenhaw & Allen), globalization (2010), damaged relationships (Moseley 2009), or times of social crises (Kelly M. Smith).

When it comes to Africa, Nhwatiwa (2012) insists preaching with a context in mind is the most appropriate method of making the Gospel pertinent for African people (ch. 1). African contexts not only require preachers to address issues confronting the people, but they also evoke particular means of communication such as parables, to

deliver the Gospel message. Despite the presence of the written word in Bible translations and where dialects have been transformed into written scripts, the African culture, especially south of the Sahara, is still an oral culture. The spoken word is highly regarded. Since the Gospel message contains the spoken words of Jesus, when it is proclaimed through a sermon, the congregation receives it as from an authoritative source requiring obedience. (Niwatiwa 2012 ch. 3).

### ***The Preacher Informed by Experience***

The preacher's experience in the proclamation of the word cannot be overlooked. As one of the criteria of conventional theology in Methodism, experience plays a vital role in preaching. A preacher who has experienced God's grace and love can easily share it with others (Tripp, 20). Preachers who have not experienced God's love and forgiveness could easily become emotionally unhealthy and suffer from "spiritual schizophrenia" that disconnects the "public pastoral persona" and "the private [person]" (Tipp 18). Paul D. Tripp suggests each preacher "let biblical literacy and theological knowledge define...maturity," and not confuse ministry success with God's endorsement of unhealthy lifestyles" (21-28).

When a preacher includes relevant personal experience in a sermon, it "can enable people to envision new possibilities for discipleship" and it makes them believe the Gospel can become real in their lives as well (Long, 199). However, Long cautions preachers not to limit experience to themselves or other preachers so as not to give the impression that the reality of the Gospel is limited to preachers. More importantly, preachers need to understand how experiences and other illustrations function within the

sermon (199). Making the same point but from a historical perspective, Forrest et al identifies how some of the preachers from the Middle Ages, such as Bernard and Anselm, employed experience to connect with the experiences of their listeners (ch. 12).

According to Anna Carter Florence, the sermon is always biblically based. However, there is a distinctive kind of sermon delivery described as “experiential preaching” as the kind that take “biblical truth” and applies it to living as a Christian each day so that the Gospel is relevant and “applicable to everyday life” (60). Although one could say every sermon should contain some facets of practicality and application, Carter names “experiential preaching” as “applicatory preaching” (61). After the civil war in Liberia many persons were dealing with the issue of forgiving those who had inflicted wounds on them.

### ***Conversing with the Bible***

The Bible is more than a historical text. It also has many voices. According to Donn F. Morgan in his book *Talking with the Bible: Scripture as Conversation Partner*, each voice is connected to a literary genre, has a specific social reality, and has clear functions and relevance. Christians, especially preachers, should constantly be in conversation with the Bible in a two-way dialogue where they speak and listen to each other through recognition of the voices (ch. 1). To have beneficial conversations with the Bible, preachers and anyone who engages it in this way must begin on a relational level and see the Bible in its social context of its first hearers and the contemporary ones (ch. 1). In the process of this conversation, preachers will hear the voices of a lawgiver (ch. 5), a prophet (ch. 6), a historian (ch. 6), a visionary (ch. 7), as a sage (ch. 8), and a lamenter (ch. 9).

Brad R. Braxton agrees with the view that the preacher is in constant conversation with God through the Bible and asserts that those conversations with the Bible must lead to how particular texts, whether Old Testament or New Testament, clarify and expound on the Gospel (Intro.). The preacher is like a herald or a news reporter who announces what has already occurred (ch. 1).

In teaching village pastors about interpreting the Bible, one step in the process of exegesis must include having the context of the local church as a part of the conversation so that the scriptures will come to life among the people.

## **Writing the Sermon**

### *Introduction*

When the conversation with a text is complete, it is time to begin thinking about writing the sermon while taking into serious consideration the context of the congregation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, many village pastors in Liberia have very limited formal Western education and many more are illiterate. Consequently, rather than focus on formal writing of a sermon, this section will deal with organizing the sermon.

From the vantage point of Thomas Long, the exegesis process has several steps which if taken seriously would lead to a well prepare sermon. He named them as (A) Getting the text in view, (B) Getting introduced to the text, (C) Attending to the text, (D) Testing what is heard in the text, and (E) Moving toward the sermon. (Long, 70)

According to Long, the first step under “getting the text in view” is to choose the biblical text from which the sermon will be based. Long reminds preachers that there was

an earlier approach in which the preacher would preach the entire Bible, book by book, text by text, from Genesis to Revelation. Long calls such a process *Lectio continua*. (71). Long informs writes that “A preaching text taken from its setting in the Bible is an artificial creation.” (73)

### ***Getting the Text in View***

Long argues that:

“The Bible does not come to us in little bits and pieces, in individual texts and isolated periscopes. It comes to us as a canon, a set of documents that are themselves letters, legal writings, historical narratives, and so on. We have to tear a small-enough piece to handle in a single sermon.” (73)

Getting to know where the chosen text begins and where it ends enables the preacher to get a wider picture of what the text is about, what it is saying and in what historical, cultural, religious or political setting it is situated. The preacher then makes use of this information in relation to her contextual realities to craft a sermon. Preachers ought to understand, according to Long, that “All texts are part of the overall flow of a document and are linked to their surroundings. Rather we are seeking a text that can stand as a reasonably coherent unit of thought.” (75)

At this point the decision the decision the preacher makes on the selection of text is just a temporary one. They could change their mind about the text as they move to another step depending on what they intend the message to focus on. The next step under getting to know the text is to find a reliable translation of the text. Not all translations of the Bible convey the biblical message the same way. All would-be preachers of the Word should be concerned about the countless amount of Bible translations in the world today.

If they are not careful in selecting which Bible translation to use, the sermon they preach could be misleading.

Thomas Long is emphatic that selecting an appropriate translation is important because “every translation of a biblical text is already an interpretation of that text.” (75) The implication here is that if the Bible translation interprets the text wrongly the message based on that biblical text will also be misleading.

Long demonstrates the differences in translation by using Psalm 46.10a:

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV): “Be still, and know that I am God!”

New International Version (NIV): “Be still, and know that I am God!”

Revised English Bible (REB): “Let be then; learn that I am God.”

King James Version (KJV): “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Tanakh (Jewish Study Bible): “Desist! Realize that I am God!”

There are various shades of meaning in the different translations. The NRSV, NIV and KJV have “Be still” at the beginning of the text which could mean some sense of quietude while the Jewish translation can be viewed as a commend to disengage from an act that is not good and pleasant. The translation use makes a difference when it comes to interpretation of the text.

### ***Getting Introduced to the Text***

The next stage in crafting the prophetic sermon is “Getting Introduced to the Text.” The first step in this stage is simply to look out for words, phrases, and terms that seem unfamiliar to help the preacher understand what the text says. Long says “This is the time to look up any unfamiliar terms in the text, like “ephah” or “zealot” or “phylactery,” in a Bible dictionary.” (78) An additional step, according to Long, is to “Place the text in

its larger context.” In this step, Long suggests that preachers find a good Bible commentary or encyclopedia to locate where the text fits into the larger context of book of the Bible under consideration.

This step requires preacher to see the text beyond its local structure into the larger scope of the Book. This understanding of the larger context of the text under consideration broadens the scope of the preacher’s view about the text. Thus, the preacher is able to deal with it adequately in developing the overall structure of the sermon.

Long uses the story of the encounter of Jesus with Zacchaeus as recorded in Luke 19:1-10 to explain the importance of placing the text in its larger context. He makes use of the insight of three biblical scholars from three different commentaries:

- In Allen Culpepper’s treatment of Luke in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, the story is placed in a larger section titled “The Journey to Jerusalem” (Luke 9.51-19.27), but it is also placed in a much smaller unit called “Jesus’ Gospel to the Rich and Poor” (Luke 18. 1-19.27). In this smaller unit are the parables of the Persistent Widow, the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, and the story of a rich ruler engages Jesus about issues related to eternal life.
- In Keith Nickle’s *Preaching the Gospel of Luke*, the story of Zacchaeus is also placed in a larger section and named “Journey to Jerusalem,” but in the smaller unit to this larger theme he titled it “Hearing with Understanding and Seeing with Perception.” According to Long, Nickle believes the reign of God has come near in Jesus and it is the blind man who understands this reality clearly (Luke 18:35-

43) and not the rich ruler (Luke 18: 18-25) nor the disciples of Jesus (Luke 18:26-34).

- In Sharon Ringe’s commentary on Luke, the story of Zacchaeus is titled “Making the Path While Walking: The Road to Jerusalem” which is recorded in Luke 9:51-19:28 and also in a much smaller section referred to “Following Jesus” (Luke 18:1-19:28). In Ringe’s commentary, the focus is on the journey of Jesus towards Jerusalem and used as a “a certain way of life, a journey, others are invited to share and a path of life which people are beckoned to follow.” (Long, 79)

By looking at the Zacchaeus story when placed in its larger context, the reader can see that the story is just a small part of a larger narrative that describes the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem as recorded in the Gospel account of Luke. Additionally, Long shows that Culpepper’s insight “encourages us to be attentive to issues of wealth and poverty, while Nickle alerts us to matters of discernment and perception, and Ringe calls attention to the way of life that Jesus presents and to which Zacchaeus responds.” (80) Placing the text in its larger context allows the preacher to look at the text from a wide range of perspectives.

### ***Attending to the Text***

The third stage of crafting the sermon is attending to the text. The first step in attending to the text is to listen attentively to the text. The preacher should open their ears wide enough with their heart calm enough to hear and discern what the text says. Sometimes preacher approach the text with an assumption that they know and understand what the text is saying. But after attentively listening to the text, they might realize that the text

actually says something else. If pastors do not take time to discern, they can remain stuck in their original perception.

When people try to force their thoughts onto the text they distort its meaning. This speaking into the text is a process known as eisegesis. At this stage all preachers need to do is to ask all possible questions that come to mind, realizing that there is no such thing as good or foolish question at this point.

Long cautions preachers writing:

“At this point of the exegesis, the preacher begins the interrogation of the text by asking every potentially fruitful question that comes to mind. This is not the place to worry about whether our questions are theologically correct or relevant enough. This is instead the place to bombard the text with every honest query we can think of. This is the place to challenge the text, even argue with it. Sure, some of the questions we ask of the text will turn out to be trivial or misguided, but this is not the time for caution.” ( 82)

During the researcher’s days in seminary at the undergrad and graduate levels, exegesis classes were attractive. Tough questions were asked and explored and this way of engaging biblical text has remained with the researcher. The researcher therefore certainly agrees with Long that when preachers engage biblical texts with critical questions the “chances are increased that we will genuinely hear the text’s voice and receive its claim upon us.” (82).

### *Testing what is heard in the Text*

The fourth stage of the exegesis process, as advanced by Long is “Testing What Is Heard in the Text.” The first step in this stage is to explore the text in its historical context. Events of today did not evolve in vacuum. They have a connection in the past. They have a historical dimension. The Bible speaks of the creative powers of God that resulted to the created order: the creation of the world, its inhabitants and finally man (Gen.1-2). Long therefore writes that “Biblical texts also have a history, in the sense that they were written in particular moments in history and sometimes modified as they were passed along from generation to generation.” (89). The main aim of the preacher is to gather important historical information that has bearing on the sermon, especially as it relates to the history of the folks that sit to listen to the message. When the preacher makes the case that the economic, social, and political issues her congregation faces today were encountered by folks in the past and tell the story of how God intervened and turn the story around, it makes sense when the preacher proclaims a message of hope that God is able to intervene in their current hopeless situation.

The second step is to explore the literary character of the text. In this step, according to Long, the preacher looks at the writing style of the text. This process helps the preacher to then weave all of the ideas presented in the text that support the central idea of the text. For example, if God is a good God why is there so much suffering in the world today? Or exploring the theological question of why evil happens to good people?

The final step under this stage is to check the text in the commentary. It is important to check the text in commentaries to hear what others think of the text because

no one person has monopoly over ideas. Checking commentaries to get the perspectives of other biblical and theological scholars helps make the sermon rich in substance for delivery. Just how adding a little bit of salt, pepper, onion and other ingredients give soup a nice taste, so it is with consulting commentaries if the sermon is to be well prepared. While commentaries should be consulted, this should never be the first step. The preacher should not go straight to commentaries.

Reference to commentaries should come last because if the preacher goes directly to the commentary, the temptation is to rely solely on the commentator. Long advise that “If the preacher consulted the commentaries too early, before engaging in the earlier text, the temptation would be for the preacher to be quiet while the expert did all the talking.” (6) This practice devalues the preacher’s voice and perspective and elevates that of the commentary. Giving reasons why one should turn to a commentary as a last resort, Long writes: “The reason is that we do not, or anyway should not, interpret the text individualistically but within a larger circle of interpretation, a community discrimination where private views are checked, enriched, corrected, and deepened.” (95)

### ***Moving Toward the Sermon***

The fifth and final stage of the exegetical process is “Moving toward the Sermon.” While this is the final stage, the exegesis process never really ends. It is never really completed because even at the point of concluding a sermon there is always this feeling that something important during the exegesis process that was left out. At this stage of the exegetical process the preacher must “State the claim of the text upon the hearers.” (Long, 97).

When the sermon is prepared, it is not the exegesis that states the claim of the text upon the hearers. In other words, it is not necessarily the exegesis process that delivers to the people the message so contained in the text. The preacher does this. The role of the exegesis process is to help the preacher provide all the needed information of the text so that the congregation understands the message and thus apply it to their lives.

Thomas Long writes:

“Good exegesis can point us in the right direction. It can provide essential information about the text, and it can uncover issues in the text we would never have seen at first glance. It can help us in many ways, but it finally cannot do what is most important: tell us what this text wishes to say on this occasion to our congregation.” (97)

Long goes on to say that “The preacher must decide this, and it is a risky and exciting decision. It discloses some of the text’s secrets. It is up to the preacher, then, to bring the life of the congregation into the text’s presence, to dwell there long and prayerfully, and to discern the reality of this text as it is with us. This is eventful,” Long argues, “Something happens between text and people: a claim is made, a voice is heard, a textual will is exerted, and the sermon will be a bearing witness to this event.” (97)

Another element of homiletical literature that village pastors can benefit from is pastoral preaching. *Writing in Pastoral Preaching: Building a People for God*, Conrad Mbewe describes its aim as “to produce a people who know their God and are living lives that glorify him” (1). There is a kind of community building in pastoral preaching because it produces church members who are spiritually mature. This maturity facilitates connection among people as a result of the fruit of the Spirit. Mbewe makes distinctions

between motivational speaking, which produces growth but no depth, evangelistic preaching, which seeks for conversion, and pastoral preaching, which leads to a deeper relationship with God and other members of the community. In the absence of formal Bible colleges or where pastors are unable to enroll in formal theological training, it is necessary to utilize other seasoned and experienced pastors whose ministries have proven to be “successful” (3). This method has proven fruitful in Liberia. Rural pastors are usually supervised by experienced elders who serve as their mentors and report to the District Superintendent about their progress in ministry.

A third type of sermon is the empowerment sermon. According to Victor I. Ezigbo in *Rhetoric of God's Empowerment in Nigeria Christianity: Its Import for Christian Identity and Social Responsibility*, the empowerment sermon galvanizes church members “to confront social problems” without becoming a problem itself such as transmitting beliefs of prosperity gospel (199-200). Gwyneth McClendon and Rachel Riedl are critical of empowerment sermons in Africa because they promoted extreme individualism while ignoring “large-scale provision of social services such as health care and education” (121). In training village pastors to deliver empowerment sermons, there can be emphases on engaging spiritual warfare and personal transformation for the benefit of the community.

### **Delivering the Sermon: Becoming the Object of Focus**

Many of the rural village pastors of Liberia are still at the foundational level of oral and have not moved to the level of the written language. From an anthropological perspective, Gary Palmer explains that verbal languages are deeply rooted in the

speakers' world view and how they understand reality (113). Consequently, any training with illiterate and semi-literate village pastors must take this into account.

Since the sermon is an oral exercise, rural pastors require a different approach in sermon preparation and delivery. In the effort to present training to these pastors, Walter Ong points out that those still steeped in oral culture “learn by apprenticeship...by listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them” as well as by assimilation and participation (8).

To make training effective, whether done by apprenticeship, listening or by repeating what trainers hear require a unique form of training based on the sole use of words and possibly through the use of an interpreter, which in turn, filters English into the dialect of the trainees. However, for the purpose of this project, all the participants are from the Kpelleh tribe and can read and write the English language. What the trainees are aware of is that words have power and can impact people immediately because they are connected to concrete reality. Every word or sentence must point to a concrete reality the listeners have experienced through sensory expressions (Ong, 32-33).

Some preachers think that by being loud or long windy and boring listeners with very long messages that the listeners will get the message and take it home with them. David Ward, in his book *Practicing the Preaching Life* believes “No listener should regularly feel that he is now ‘entering the second sermon’” (158).

Thomas Long describes preaching as a witness, which gives the impression of a testimony, a personal witness of what God has done. One category of such witnessing is the “biblical witness” which requires the preacher “to interpret scripture deeply mindful

of the lives and needs of the hearers” (73). In this sense, the preacher is like a priest “who represents the people before the text as a way of representing them before God” (73).

Anna Carter Florence uses the word, “testimony” in a slightly different way not so much as a personal verification of what God has done in the life of the preacher but more of what they have “seen and heard in the biblical text and in life, and then confesses what she believes about it” (xiii). Her book contains numerous examples of this kind of testimony. This is useful for rural pastors in Liberia because the people they speak to are probably asking what God and the Bible have to say about their experiences. Having sermons relate to the lives and reality of people in the community can be effective for spiritual growth and evangelization.

For rural pastors who rely solely on the spoken word, Teresa Fry Brown has a valuable book titled, *Delivering the Sermon: Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation* to assist their training. Even for those pastors who are literate and highly educated, the delivery of a sermon matters. The use of jokes, and variation of voice cadence, and clear images help the preacher in delivery. Since the spoken word is the primary and only form of communication they have, it is important to allow rural pastors understand its importance and develop their own styles to be creative and engage the listeners.

### **Feedback: What Are They Saying About the Sermon?**

Evaluation, or the critique and assessment of any program is vital to the success of that program. Michael Duduit suggests that the preacher evaluates their own sermon to ensure it has adhered to the essential rubrics of good sermons such as being faithful to the text and being relevant to the hearers. John McClure acknowledges how essential it is to

solicit and listen to feedback about the sermon because it is a way of “improving one’s preaching and increasing involvement of listeners in the sermon process” (35). The absence of feedback can lead to the preaching being isolated from how the audience heard and received the sermon.

Robert G. Kemper encourages the use of feedback. He also encourages an atmosphere where the feedback is productive, helpful and focuses on particulars rather than vague generalizations. In rural communities, it might require working directly with the preparation of the congregations to provide feedback so that they will know how to offer it in a loving, truthful way that is not cruel or vindictive.

Though feedback from the congregation is critical if the preacher is to be effective in the proclamation of the Gospel message, a word of caution for preacher from Eben Nhiwatiwa is worth mentioning. Nhiwatiwa writes:

“A preacher can never be certain how hearers might receive and appropriate the message. But we continue to preach with assured faith that, in the last analysis, prerogative to preach the gospel belongs to God. Thus, God will find ways of touching the hearts and minds of those who avail themselves to hear the message.” (24)

### **Biblical Literacy in Oral Cultures**

Equipping rural pastors for effective ministry requires a level of biblical literacy. The Northwest Center Biblical and Theological Literacy defines biblical literacy as “the ability and motivation of people to read the Bible with sufficient understanding so that they can explain its basic meaning, having sufficient knowledge and skill to use resources

that enable them to discern the basic meaning of a biblical text” (Larry Perkins). Quoting a report from the US Center for World Missions, Jonathan Groves mentions the existence of “two million untrained ‘functional pastors’ leading churches in the world today” (2). Many of those pastors live and work in rural areas of Liberia. The report recommends improving theological education for those illiterate rural pastors “in doctrine, discipleship, evangelism, nurture, and service” (Groves 2). In this case, biblical literacy is problematic due to the pastors’ lack of formal education because these pastors rely on listening to the biblical narratives before re-telling it themselves. This might lead to another project of producing audio materials in the vernacular of rural pastors.

Since such a project does not exist at the time of this research, the plight of rural pastors, many of whom do not have any formal theological training, Jonathan Groves mentions that biblical literacy in Africa should take the culture into consideration. Such considerations should include several realities such as the existence of God in Africa prior to the introduction of Christianity because “the existence of God is unquestionable” (Groves 3) as a supreme being rather than a personal divinity. Consequently, although the idea of God is not new to the rural African pastor, the personal nature of God in the Incarnation of Jesus is new because of the traditional African view that the Creator God “withdrew from the world after mankind disappointed Him and does not communicate with people directly” and have to connect with God sometimes through their deceased ancestors (Groves 3).

### **Kind of Training Necessary**

In his thesis titled, *A Generalized Alternative Leadership Development Model for the Two-Thirds World Church*, Baylor (2007) discusses the type of training that was

necessary for rural pastors in what he called the “Two-thirds World.” The author calls attention to the origin of Theological Education by Extension (TEE) as an alternative to formal theological training where there was a need for a residential program, strict educational requirement, and a “curriculum with...strong emphasis on reading and writing (which) was often beyond the academic capabilities of many leaders” (Baylor 38). Theological Education by Extension has three modules: “cognitive input, field experience, and seminars” (Baylor 38).

The cognitive input is knowledge based, allowing students “to progress in small, manageable steps, at their own pace, while providing positive reinforcement through active participation and self-checking” (Baylor 39). The field experience module allows real life experiences, which could come from the learners or from other sources for discussions. The seminars offer “a forum for dealing with any issues the learners may encounter; discussion and networking with other learners, accountability and testing” (Baylor 40).

### **Rural Liberian Context**

In the United Methodist Church of Liberia, rural pastors are those who serve in rural communities. Rural areas in Liberia are towns and villages where basic social, economic and educational services are lacking. Most of the pastors are elders in the associate order, or simply put, associate members of conference. Some of these pastors do not read or write the English language and therefore make use of oral communication through the local vernacular to do ministry in oral settings. The Board of Ordained Ministry of the Conference conducts periodic pastoral trainings to improve the ministerial

effectiveness of rural pastors. Those who go through five cycles of trainings administered by the Board are eligible to apply for ordination as associate members of Conference. The Board then conducts interview to determine their suitability. Those who meet the minimum requirement are recommended to the full ministerial session to be ordained as associate elders.

Most pastors serving in rural areas do not receive salary. They are paid in kind, meaning, at the end of the month members of the congregation would take to the pastor produce from their farms such as plantain, cassava, eddoes, and so forth. In some cases, the parishioners would help the pastor in cultivating her farm and help her with all the associated works until harvest time. Rural pastors have no health or insurance benefit until retirement. Upon retirement, through the Central Conference Pension Scheme, they receive \$60.00USD quarterly until death. When they die the benefit is then transferred to their surviving spouse.

During their active service, each rural pastor is to contribute 5% of her monthly income toward the Central Conference Pension scheme while the local church contributes 10% of the pastor's monthly income. However, because most of these rural pastors do not receive monthly salary, they are unable to contribute to their pension. Health benefit is non-existent. One pastor who is unable to contribute toward her pension simply because she does not earn a monthly income said: "In my old age, like most of my other friends who retired before me, I will depend upon my children to take care of me."

However, regardless of the precarious socio-economic and other life issues they face, rural pastors are winning souls for Jesus Christ. They are assigned in predominantly Islamic areas where they come face to face with the danger of being harassed or

intimidated by opposing religious faith. They come face to face with competing African Traditional religious practices in villages and towns where they are beaten and driven away for attempting to introduce strange teaching inconsistent with traditional values and practices. These rural pastors have become fanatics of Jesus and are willing to bear the cross of Jesus in the face of danger. Indeed, these rural pastors “live dangerously” every day for the sake of God’s Kingdom.

### **Nature of Pastoral Ministry in Rural Africa**

In the publication, *Theological Education in Liberia: Problems and Opportunities*, Kulah (1994) recognizes the need to prepare men and women who are trained for pastoral ministry in rural Liberia. Bennett (2015) shares the view that pastors working with rural dwellers “are called to engage with those who work the land or whose occupations are linked with the land, and with the wider community” where it is easy to see people “sharing in community festivals that celebrate the natural world, living alternative lifestyles that honor the energies of soil, seasons, and the elemental life forces” (76).

Based on the spiritual outlook of many parts of sub-Saharan Africa where the belief that attribute suffering to “sins and misdeeds that offend the gods and ancestors, or by being out of harmony with the community,” rural Africa is in need of healing and reconciliation (Manda, 2). Rural pastors are in an advantageous position to promote healing through the power found in the name of Jesus and reconciliation as a part of the redemption process of salvation. These concepts can easily become sermonic themes.

### **Literature for Research Design**

This research utilized a qualitative methodology of data gathering and analysis. According to Creswell and Poth qualitative research addresses “the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (42). The group in this case is the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist church and the expectations for training imposed on all pastors. While some pastors have the ability to pursue formal theological education to the postgraduate level, many who serve the rural areas are illiterate or semi-literate. The issue under exploration is the development of knowledge, attitudes and skills in preaching by rural pastors that will lead to effective evangelism and discipleship.

Sensing recognizes the researcher as an observer-participant of the community “in the process of gathering and interpreting data to enable new and transformative modes of action” (63). As chairperson of the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Liberia Annual Conference, it became evident from observation and requests from District Superintendents that rural pastors needed training for more effective preaching that will evangelize and generate spiritual maturity. This led to the formulation of an action-based research, using pre and post-test intervention analysis (Sensing, 2011, 63).

The instruments for collecting data are the pre-intervention/post-intervention survey, questionnaire, and interviews. The population sample is rural pastors serving within the Liberia Area of the United Methodist Church. Before the training program, the pre-test intervention was administered. Upon completion of the program, the post-intervention was given to determine the effects of the training on the pastors.

### Summary of Literature Review

The majority of the literature was qualitative in nature and used the narrative approach. With a vast amount of literature on preaching, the focus was on the biblical and theological foundations. The theological foundations highlighted the preacher's identity and preparation for Sunday with subsequent subtopics.

Rural pastors in Liberia UMC tend to be illiterate or semi-literate, yet they desire training to be equipped to preach sound sermons to evangelize and stimulate discipleship or Christian maturity. The literature reviewed made a connection between the preacher and the community where the preacher is faithful to the Gospel message while reflecting the concerns of the community.

In training rural pastors in Liberia, the book, *The Mission of Preaching: Equipping the Community for Faithful Witness*, Patrick Johnson (2015) identifies four literary devices rural village pastors could take advantage of. These devices are the metaphor, which is like an analogy, the metonymy, which is "a figure of speech," the synecdoche or symbolism, and irony (19-22). Ultimately, the purpose of preaching is to "equip the congregation for its confession to the world" (22).

Training rural pastors to use metaphorical language is critical because when properly used in sermon preparation and delivery, it resonates with people in rural contexts. Metaphor is a figure of speech containing an implied comparison. With metaphors, words or phrases that ordinarily applied to one thing are applied to something you would not necessarily pair with it (<https://examples.yourdictionary.com/metaphor-example>). When used properly, metaphors create very strong images and leave lasting impressions. Metaphors allow us to have a greater impact on the readers. With metaphors

preachers can convey a thought more forcefully than with an ordinary statement (<https://examples.yourdictionary.com/metaphor-example>). For example, speaking metaphorically, when a rural dweller says to a neighbor “you are a snake in the grass”, she simply means the neighbor is an enemy or a traitor who is capable of stabbing her in the back. So, when the rural preacher tells her congregation during the preaching moment that the devil is a “snake in the grass”, they can easily relate to and understand what the preacher is saying, that indeed the snake represents the devil that leads people astray.

Metonymy is also a figure of speech in which a thing or concept is referred to by the name of something closely associated with that thing or concept ([en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)). One famous example of a metonymy is “The pen is mightier than the sword” to mean that a piece of literary work is capable of affecting a whole nation. One metonymy commonly used in Liberia to speak about the integrity of someone is “I can put my neck on the chopping board for him”. When someone speaks of someone else like this in Liberia it means that they know the person to have a high degree of moral credentials.

On the other hand, synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a term for a part of something refers to the whole or vice versa. For example, “hired hands can be used to represent workers”. This is the part representing the whole. Or police can be used to represent several police officers, a whole representing a part.

As for irony, it is also a figure of speech in which words are used in such a way that their intended meaning is different from the actual meaning of the words. It may also be a situation that ends up in quite a different way than what is generally anticipated (<https://literarydevices.net/irony>). When my wife tells our daughter that Lot wife is in the

soup and it taste good, she means the soup is so salty that no one is able to eat it. This is an example of irony.

The four literary devices described above are useful to rural pastors in Liberia as they minister. They are useful tools that connect the spoken Word to the context of the congregation in ways that make sense of the Gospel so thereby winning people to Jesus Christ.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

The current membership of the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church is 286,000 (2018 Conference Journal). This large membership increasingly puts pressure on the Bishop, cabinet and the Board of Ordained Ministry to recruit and train more pastors to carry out the task of preaching evangelism and discipleship which this research is exploring.

This chapter describes the research method employed to assess the current knowledge, attitude and practices among rural pastors of the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church prior to participating in a five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermons. A brief history of the Gbarnga District Conference is also included in this chapter. The chapter describes the nature and purpose of the project followed by the research questions. The instruments used to address each research question are also described. The chapter finally explains the process used in gathering and analyzing the data collected from the instruments.

#### **Nature and Purpose of the Project**

In March 1833, Rev. Melville B. Cox of the then Methodist Episcopal Church planted Methodism on the Liberia soil. Today the United Methodist Church in Liberia is the largest Protestant denomination in the country (*A Brief History of the Methodist in Liberia* by Willis King, 1972). Most of the church growth activities are taking place in towns and villages at an unprecedented pace owing to the work done by rural pastors. For

the purpose of this project, rural pastors are those serving in remote areas that do not have the educational background to attend seminary. To continue the current pace of church growth, capacity building through training is critical for the sake of preaching evangelism and discipleship. This research seeks to accomplish this task. The purpose of this research was to therefore measure the changes in knowledge, attitude and practices among rural pastors in the Gbarnga District Conference of the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church who participated in a five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermons.

### **Research Questions**

This intervention project was concerned with addressing the levels of knowledge, attitude and practices among rural pastors who participated in a five-day training experience on preparing sermons that are based on scripture, well exegeted and theologically grounded. To be able to achieve this task, three research questions were asked as indicated:

#### **Research Question #1:**

**What were the levels of knowledge, attitude, and practice among rural pastors in the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church prior to the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based sermons that follow the principles of proper exegesis and are theologically sound?**

The purpose of this research question was to authenticate from the literature review and the pre-test questionnaire the level of knowledge, practice and attitude of rural

pastors in the area of preparing and preaching sermons that are biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent prior to engaging in a five-day training experience to equip them for ministry. To address this question, a pre-test containing eleven questions survey and a post-test of twelve questions were developed. As seen in appendix A (pre-test), questions 6, 7, 8, & 9 were designed to measure the levels of knowledge of twenty-five rural pastors of the Gbarnga District Conference of the United Methodist Church prior to participating in the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver sermons that are biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermons. Question 10 was designed to measure the attitude of the participants while question 11 was designed to measure their practices prior to the five-day training experience.

**Research Question #2:**

**What were the levels of knowledge, attitude and practice among rural pastors in the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church following the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based sermons that follow the principles of proper exegesis and are theologically sound?**

The main reason for this question was to find out the levels of knowledge, attitude and practice among rural pastors through the work of the literature review and data that will be collected following the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver sermons that are properly exegeted, biblically based, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent. To be able to accomplish this goal, a post-test survey method was used. As seen in appendix B, questions 1, 2, 3, 4, & 5 were designed to measure the level of knowledge or understanding of participants about preparing and delivering a biblically

based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically sound sermon following the five-day training experience.

Additionally, question 6 measured the practice of participants following the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver a biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermon.

**Research Question #3:**

**What aspect of the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based sermons that follow the principles of proper exegesis and theologically sound that had the greatest impact on the observed changes among participants?**

The purpose of this research question was to inquire of and to be certain as to what aspect of the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver sermons that are properly exegeted, biblically based and theologically sound had the greatest impact on the observed changes in knowledge, attitude and practice among participants. To be able to adequately address this research question, a post-test survey questionnaire was developed in which questions 7, 8, 9, 10, & 11 were designed to measure the current level of practice of participants and to find out which aspect of employing the proper use of exegesis, scripture, theology, and homiletics in sermon preparation and delivery was most helpful on the one hand and least helpful on the other hand following the five-day training experience.

Questions 12 was designed to get feedback from participants as to how the proper use of exegesis, scripture, theology, and homiletics improved the way the way they

prepare and deliver biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermons.

### **Ministry Context**

The Gbarnga District Conference of the United Methodist Church is named after the Capital City of one of the fifteen political subdivisions of Liberia called Bong County. Bong County has twelve districts namely: Boinsen, Fuamah, Jorquelleh, KoKoyah, Kpaai, Panta, Salala, Sanayea, Suakoko, Tukpahlee, Yeallehlee and Zota districts. Gbarnga District Conference of the United Methodist Church lies northeast of the City of Monrovia, Capital City of the Republic of Liberia. It has the highest number of pastors totaling sixty-seven under episcopal appointment.

Of this amount only four are ordained elders in full connection who have seminary education. The rest are pastors who do not have the requisite educational background to pursue seminary education but have participated in several pastors' course of study that qualified them to be ordained as associate elders. The Pastors Course of Study is a five-year study track administered by the Board of Ordained Ministry in the Liberia Annual Conference.

The second indigenous Bishop of the United Methodist Church in Liberia, Retired Bishop Arthur F. Kulah, came from this area. Gbarnga District plays host to two major institutions, the Phebe Medical hospital owned and operated by the Lutheran Church in Liberia and the Cuttington University, an institution of higher learning owned and operated by the Episcopal Church of Liberia. The official dialect spoken in the Gbarnga District is Kpelle which also make up the largest tribal group in Liberia. It has a large

Muslim population with a very strong interfaith collaboration that has witnessed both Muslims and Christians in a healthy partnership.

## **Participants**

### **Criteria for Selection**

There are sixty-seven assigned pastors within the Gbarnga District Conference where the five-day training will take place. The twenty-five pastors selected to take part in the five-day training on how to prepare and deliver sermons that are properly exegeted, biblically based, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent were pastors that do not have the academic credentials to pursue seminary education but graduated from the five-year cycle of training conducted by the Board of Ordained Ministry. The training is known as the *Pastors Course of Study*. Those who complete the five-year cycle are recommended for ordination in the associate order by their District Committee on Ordained Ministry to the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry. These pastors are in a better position than others to measure the levels of their knowledge on how to prepare and deliver sermons that are properly exegeted, biblically based, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent because of the level of knowledge gained over the years as pastors in active ministry settings.

### **Description of Participants**

A total number of twenty-five pastors participated in the training experience, twelve males and thirteen females. Among the male participants, five were aged between forty-one to fifty years. These five had been in pastoral ministry between eleven to eighteen years and had been assigned to their current ministry between six to nine years.

Five males were aged between fifty-one to sixty years and had been in ministry between ten to thirty-two years and had stayed in current place of assignment between ten to fourteen years. One male was aged between sixty to seventy and had been in ministry for forty-six years. He had been in current pastoral assignment for sixteen years. The last male participant was above seventy years, has been in ministry for forty-two years and in current place of assignment for the last twelve years. In terms of educational background, eight of the twelve male participants were high school dropouts, one was a high school graduate, and the other three acquired eight-grade level education.

Of the thirteen female participants, four were aged between thirty-one to forty years and had been in ministry between nine to thirteen years. The four had been in current pastoral assignment between three to seven years. Four of the female participants were between forty-one to fifty years old and had been in ministry between nine to twenty years. Two females between fifty-one to sixty years old and have been in ministry. Both had been in current place of assignment between six to eleven years. The additional three female participants were between sixty-one to seventy years old and had been assigned to current ministry sites between five to eight years.

There was a limitation in authenticating the ages of all the participants because they said their parents were not literate to record their actual birth dates. They explained that their birth dates were determine either during the period of a major political event during the time of their birth, like the election of the president of the country or during the time of some serious disaster. These pastors also said their birthdates were also associated with the time a specific area in the forest was cut down and cultivated for rice

farm. Therefore, the actual birthdates of all the participants could not be authenticated with birth certificates.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The twenty-five pastors selected to participate in the five-day training experience all consented to participate when the researcher explained the purpose the research and the nature of their participation. All the participants speak and understand English well. Verbal consent to participate was acquired individually. A verbal consent narrative was read and explained to the participants by the researcher. It clearly stated that they were at liberty to participate or not to participate and that there would be no consequence for deciding not to participate. The participants were also told that on the first day of the five-day training event they would be asked to answer some questions related to their knowledge on how to prepare sermons that are properly exegeted, biblically based, theologically sound and homiletically excellent. The participants were further told that the questions to be answered will be explained adequately to them for their understanding and only those who agree to answer the questions would participate and that no one would be angry with those who choose not to participate.

### **Instrumentation**

Permission to undertake this research was obtained firstly from the District Superintendent of the Gbarnga District Conference. Thereafter, with the approval of the Superintendent, a meeting was arranged to meet with all participants to inform them about the nature of the research and their role in the research.

Twenty-three questions in pre and post-test survey questionnaires were used to collect data to measure the levels of knowledge, attitude and practice among rural pastors

that participated in a five-day training experience. The pre-test questionnaire contained eleven questions while, the post-test contained twelve questions. The researcher made sure that questions contained in the survey questionnaire did not elicit information from the participants that would make known their individual identity. All information collected through the survey questionnaire for analysis was stored in the researcher's personal laptop, and only the researcher had access to and the password for the laptop computer. The hard copy of the questionnaire was stored in the researcher's desk at his office. The desk has a compartment to keep files of this nature to which only the researcher has a key. Additionally, the office of the researcher is always locked until opened by the researcher.

### **Reliability and Validity of Project Design**

Because the research is based on intervention and qualitative in nature, the researcher made use of a questionnaire as an instrument to respond to the research questions. The researcher relied on the outcome of questions as contained in the questionnaire to measure the levels of knowledge, attitude and practice among participants that participated in the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver sermons that are properly exegeted, biblically based, theologically sound and homiletically excellent.

### **Data Collection**

Given the size and scope of the United Methodist Church in Liberia, one of the first tasks was to set a boundary for the research. Of the 20 District Conferences and two circuits of the United Methodist Conferences in Liberia, the researcher selected the Gbarnga District as venue, the largest District conference in terms of membership.

Because the project is intervention and qualitative in nature, Tim Sensing's insight and suggestions on how to go about collecting data for such a research was helpful. Sensing asserts that "Data collection begins with setting the boundaries for the study; it continues by collecting information through observations, interviews, documents, and visual materials, etc., and concludes by establishing the protocol for recording the information" (90). The study was designed to measure the levels of knowledge, attitude and practice among twenty-five rural pastors who were selected to participate in a five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver sermons that are properly exegeted, biblically based, theologically sound and homiletically excellent. As an intervention research that is qualitative in nature, the pre and post-test questionnaire were employed as an instrument to measure the levels of their knowledge, attitude and practice prior to and following the five-day training experience.

The pre and post-text questionnaires were distributed to the participants prior to and following the five-day training experience and later analyzed to determine their level of knowledge, attitude and practice.

### **Data Analysis**

Sensing's perspective on data analysis played a key role in analyzing the data collected from the questionnaire. According to Sensing:

"One person's response may prompt or modify another person's memory of an event and its details. Because not everyone will have the same views and experience; participants influence one another. Differences in age, gender, education, access to resources, and other factors will prompt a variety of

responses that may not emerge in a homogeneous group setting or from the individual interview” (120).

The open-ended questions in the pre and post-test qualitative questionnaire were designed to measure the levels of knowledge, attitude and practice among rural pastors prior to and following their participation in a five-day training on how to prepare and deliver sermons that undergo proper exegesis, deeply rooted in scripture and are theologically sound.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter reports the data of the three research questions that were used to guide the research project and also gives an overview of the major findings. As stated in earlier chapters, the United Methodist Church is the largest Protestant denomination in Liberia with a membership of 206,000. Most of the pastors do not have the requisite educational background to pursue seminary education but they are the ones in villages and towns preaching the Gospel Jesus Christ and making disciples in significant ways.

The need for continuing education for these pastors to make them more effective in preaching and discipleship cannot be overemphasized. Over the years, the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church has been involved in periodic pastoral trainings for these pastors as a way to enhance their ministerial efficacy. The effectiveness of these rural pastors has contributed to church growth across the conference.

Hence, the purpose of this research project was to measure the changes in knowledge, attitude and practices among rural pastors in the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church who participated in a five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent sermons.

### Participants

Table 4.1 provides demographic information, highlighting the number of participants (N), gender (G), age range (AR), number of years in ministry (NYM) and number of years at current ministry (NYCM) site.

**Table 4.1 Characteristics of the Participants (N=25)**

<b>N</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>AR</b>	<b>NYM</b>	<b>NYCM</b>
N1	F	31-40	11	3
N2	F	31-40	13	7
N3	F	31-40	11	5
N4	F	31-40	9	4
N5	F	41-50	20	7
N6	F	41-50	13	5
N7	F	41-50	18	9
N8	F	41-50	9	3
N9	F	51-60	28	6
N10	F	51-60	26	11
N11	F	61-70	30	5
N12	F	61-70	33	8
N13	F	61-70	28	8
N14	M	41-50	12	8

N15	M	41-50	15	7
N16	M	41-50	12	6
N17	M	41-50	18	9
N18	M	41-50	11	6
N19	M	51-60	26	10
N20	M	51-60	32	13
N21	M	51-60	27	9
N22	M	51-60	25	14
N23	M	51-60	16	10
N24	M	61-70	46	16
N25	M	Above 70	42	12

There were thirteen females and twelve males. The ages of the females range from thirty-one to seventy years with the number of years they have been in pastoral ministry ranging from nine to thirty-three years. In terms of how long they have been assigned at current pastoral charge, the number of years range from three to eleven.

The ages of the male participants range from forty-one to above seventy years. The number of years they have been in ministry range from eleven to forty-six years while the number of years they have been serving at current ministry site range from six to sixteen years. All the participants have participated in the pastoral trainings offered by the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Liberia Annual Conference and have been ordained as associate elders.

The Focus Group was made up of seven elders in the associate order all of whom serve as leaders of zones within the District Conference. The Gbarnga District Conference is divided into seven zones and each zone is headed by a supervising elder who oversee the pastoral activities of all pastors within that zone, both ordained and those not ordained. These supervising pastors have ages ranging from fifty-five to seventy-one years and have been in pastoral ministry between sixteen to forty-six years.(see Table 4.2)

**Table 4.2 Characteristics of the Focus Group (N=7)**

<b>Zone</b>	<b>Number of Churches</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Number of Years in Ministry</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Position</b>
1	8	56	26	M	Supervising Pastor
2	7	64	33	F	Supervising Pastor
3	4	55	32	M	Supervising Pastor
4	5	58	27	M	Supervising Pastor
5	7	60	16	M	Supervising Pastor
6	8	65	46	M	Supervising Pastor
7	6	71	42	M	Supervising Pastor

### **Research Questions**

This research project was based on three research questions that are related to the purpose statement. Research Question # 1 measured the levels of knowledge, attitude and practice among participants prior to the five-day training event on how to prepare sermons that follow the principles of proper exegesis and are theologically sound.

Research Question # 2 achieved the same purpose as in Research Question # 1 following

the five-day training event. Research Question # 3 was asked to authenticate from participants which aspect of the training experience had the greatest impact on the observed changes in knowledge, attitude and practice. To be able to address these research questions, a pre-test and a post-test questionnaire were used.

### **Research Question #1 Description of Evidence**

What were the levels of knowledge, attitude, and practice among rural pastors in the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church prior to the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based sermons that follow the principles of proper exegesis and are theologically sound?

To address this question, the instrument measured questions number six, seven, eight and nine asked participants to respond, on a scale of 1-4, to the levels of their understanding regarding preparing and delivering biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent sermons. The scale was:

1. Inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry
2. Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement
3. Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry
4. Advance enough to help train other preachers

Question # 6 asked about their knowledge regarding preparing and delivering a biblically based sermon. To this question, all twenty-five participants selected #1: that their knowledge was “inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry.” Questions #7, #8 & #9 specifically sought to measure their levels of knowledge about preparing and delivering sermons that are properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent

respectively. Again, to these three questions, all twenty-five participants responded that their knowledge in preparing and delivering sermons that are properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent was “inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry.”

The table below (Table 4.3) shows the average numerical response for the four questions that measured the levels of the participants’ knowledge in preparing and delivering sermons that are biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent prior to the five-day training event.

Participants Response Indicators:

SP1 Inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry

SP2 Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement

SP3 Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry

SP4 Advance enough to help train other preachers

**Table 4.3**

<b>PRIOR TO TRAINING EVENT</b>		<b>SP1</b>		<b>SP2</b>		<b>SP3</b>		<b>SP 4</b>		<b>Total</b>	
<b>Q. #</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Res.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Res</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Res.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Res</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Res.</b>	<b>%</b>
Q# 6	Biblical based sermon	25	100%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	25	100%
Q# 7	Properly exegeted sermon	25	100%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	25	100%
Q# 8	Theologically sound sermon	25	100%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	25	100%
Q# 9	Homiletically excellent sermon	25	100%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	25	100%
<b>Total number of variables</b>		<b>25</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100%</b>

Question #10 measured the attitude of the participants in preparing and delivering sermons. The question asked them to explain why it is or is not important as preachers to offer biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermons.

Twenty-one of the participants responded that they had little or no idea why it was important or not important for preachers to offer biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermons. Four said it could be important to make the sermon good. Question #11 on the pre-text questionnaire measured the practices of the participants. The question asked them to please describe their method of preparing and delivering sermons from beginning to end. In response to this question, all the participants indicated that prayer was the first step in preparing and delivering the sermon. The second step was to refer to the lectionary they receive each year to guide them in preparing their sermon each Sunday. This is what one participant said:

I pray for God to lead me and give me the wisdom for me to do a good sermon. The next thing I do is to go to the lectionary we receive as preachers each year at Annual Conference from the Department of Christian Education. The lectionary carries all the readings for each Sunday of the year. Most of my church members also have copies of the lectionary and they expect me to preach from one of the assigned readings. If I preach a sermon not from the assigned reading for the day they get very upset. For this reason, I am restricted to the lectionary even if there is a good reason to preach from other scriptural text.

Another respondent made this comment:

My first step is prayer; my second step is prayer; my third step is prayer. I then move on to do the sermon after looking at the lectionary reading for the day to guide me in selecting my text and theme, making sure to preach from one of the assigned scripture readings for that Sunday.

### **Research Question #2 Description of Evidence**

What were the levels of knowledge, attitude, and practice among rural pastors in the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church following the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based sermons that follow the principles of proper exegesis and are theologically sound?

To answer this research question, as seen in Appendix B, a post-test questionnaire containing twelve questions was designed to measure the levels of knowledge, attitude, and practice of rural pastors following the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically sermons that follow the principles of proper exegesis and theologically sound. Questions 1-5 measured the levels of knowledge of participants following the five-days training event.

Question one asked about the levels of understanding of participants in regard to preparing and delivering biblically based sermons while question two sought to know the levels of understanding of participants in regard to their preparing and delivering sermons that are properly exegeted. Questions three and four asked about participants levels of understanding in preparing and delivering sermons that are theologically sound and homiletically excellent.

In response to question one, twenty-two participants responded that their level of understanding regarding preparing and delivering biblically based sermons was “adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement.” Three of the respondents said they had adequate knowledge for lifelong preaching. In the response of the participants to question two, all twenty-five participants indicated regarding preparing

and delivering a properly exegeted sermon, their level of understanding was adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement. In response to question three which asked specifically about participants' understanding in regard to preparing theologically sound sermons, nineteen participants said their levels of understanding was adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement. Two of the participants indicated that their levels of understanding were inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry while four responded that their understanding in regard to preparing and delivering sermons that are theologically sound was adequate for lifelong preaching ministry. All twenty-five of the participants in their response to question four indicated that their levels of understanding in regard to preparing and delivering homiletically excellent sermons were adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement.

The table below (Table 4.4) shows the average numerical response for the four questions that measured the levels of the participants' knowledge in preparing and delivering sermons that are biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent following the five-day training event.

Participants Response Indicators:

SP1 Inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry

SP2 Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement

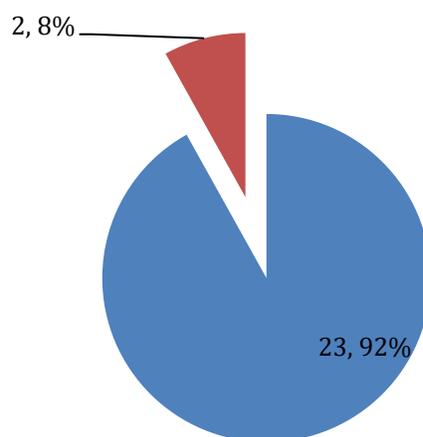
SP3 Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry

SP4 Advance enough to help train other preachers

**Table 4.4**

<b>FOLLOWING TRAINING EVENT</b>		<b>SP1</b>		<b>SP2</b>		<b>SP3</b>		<b>SP 4</b>		<b>Total</b>	
<b>Q. #</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Res.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Res</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Res.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Res</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Res</b>	<b>%</b>
Q# 1	Biblical based sermon	0	0%	22	88%	3	12%	0	0%	25	100%
Q# 2	Properly exegeted sermon	0	0%	25	100%	0	0%	0	0%	25	100%
Q# 3	Theologically sound sermon	2	8%	19	76%	4	16%	0	0%	25	100%
Q# 4	Homiletically excellent sermon	0	0%	25	100%	0	0%	0	0%	25	100%
<b>Total number of variable</b>		<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>92%</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100%</b>

### **Adequate knowledge for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement**



23 respondents who constitute 92% (Blue field) indicated they have adequate knowledge for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement while 2 respondents which constitute 8% (Red field) said they have adequate knowledge for lifelong preaching ministry.

On the post-test questionnaire, question five sought to know, the participants' current levels of skill in preparing and delivering a biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermons. Twenty-one of the participants responded that they had adequate knowledge for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement, two with inadequate knowledge while two others responded that they have adequate knowledge for lifelong preaching ministry.

Question six measured the attitude of participants and asked them to explain why it is or is not important as a preacher to offer biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent sermons following the five-day training event. In response to this question, all twenty-five participants responded that it was important as preachers to offer biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent sermons. The majority of the participants said when the sermon is rooted in scripture and goes through the process of exegesis, it will always be rich theologically and therefore becomes an excellent sermon.

One of the participants put it this way:

With what I know now about a sermon being based on the Bible and to make sure to do good exegesis on it, I believe my future sermons will be so well written because it will be a balance sermon with some theology of the text that will make the sermon a very good one.

Question seven on the post-test questionnaire examined the practice of participants following the five-day training event. Question seven reads: Please describe your method of preparing and delivering sermons. What does it look like from beginning to end? The

majority of the participants listed the following as steps they employed in preparing the sermon up to its delivery:

1. I pray for God's guidance and leading
2. I refer to the lectionary reading assigned for the day as the beginning point.
3. Do an exegesis of the text so as to understand the text very well.
4. Jot down important point after the exegesis
5. Write the sermon
6. Preach the sermon.

Question eight asked about the participants' levels of practice following the five-day training experience. The question was: On a scale of 1-4 (1. Not improved 2. Need additional training 3. Somewhat improved 4. Significantly improved) how would you describe the effect of the training on your ability to prepare and deliver a biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermon following the five-day training experience? In response to this question, nineteen participants responded that they need additional training, four participants indicated the effect of the training on their ability to prepare and deliver a biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent is somewhat improved. Two participants said the training significantly improved their ability to prepare and deliver sermons that are biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent.

### **Research Question #3 Description of the Evidence**

What aspect of the five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based sermons that follow the principles of proper exegesis and theologically sound that had the greatest impact on the observed changes among participants?

Research question #3 asked four functional questions. They were questions 9-12 on the post-test questionnaire. They inquired about the impact of the five-day training event, especially in terms of their levels of practice as a result of knowledge gained from the training experience. Question nine specifically asked: “What aspect of employing the proper use of exegesis, scripture, theology and homiletic in sermon preparation and delivery were most helpful and impactful during the five-day training experience?”

In response to this question, the majority of the participants indicated that actually practicing the exegesis during the five-day training event was helpful and impactful. The participants also indicated it was the first time that exegesis in sermon preparation was introduced to them. They reported that it was an exciting experience to know how it helps in preparing a good sermon that has its base in scripture and theology and therefore homiletically sound. Here is what one female participant said about how impactful the use of exegesis was during the five-day training event:

I always hear preachers talk about exegesis and often wonder what it is all about. I remembered asking one senior pastor about the meaning of exegesis and its’ importance to preaching and the responses I got was that exegesis was for those who attend seminary and not for those who attend the Pastors’ Course of Study. Today, I am glad I have an idea of what it is and with more training on using exegesis I believe I can be a very good preacher.

Question ten asked participants to respond to what portion of the five-day training experience in preparing and delivering sermons were least impactful and helpful. In responding to this question, majority of the participants said the use of theology in

sermon preparation was least helpful because they believe they are not very schooled in theology and do not think the use of theology was as important in preaching as using scripture and exegesis are when preparing a sermon.

Question eleven asked participants to indicate what they would change or add to make the training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent sermons more impactful and helpful. In responding to this question, most of the participants suggested that the time duration of such training be changed from one week to at least a month to allow ample time to deal adequately with all the topics and answer questions participants may have during the training event. Most of them also suggested that topics dealing with the character of preachers and some lessons on moral and ethical living standards on the part of pastors be added to future training event. Here is a direct quote from an elderly participant:

Any training of this in the future should include some teaching on how pastors should live and how they should conduct themselves. I have seen some pastors misbehave and this can make all of us look bad when the truth is that we are all not the same.

The twelfth question was, “How has the proper use of exegesis, scripture, theology and homiletics improved the way you prepare and deliver sermons?” Almost all participants acknowledged that the use of exegesis, scripture, theology and homiletics will definitely improve the way they prepare and deliver sermons. The majority also lifted up the use of scripture and exegesis as most important for them for now as they would need some more training in other areas, that is, the use of theology and homiletics. A young female participant in response to this question had this to say:

The short exercise we did in writing a sermon and trying to follow the steps in preparing the sermon, especially looking in the Bible more carefully and also doing exegesis of the text was really helpful. I am glad I had the opportunity to be part of this training which I believe will help me to prepare and deliver good sermon. I want to do this training again. I did not know how to do sermon well and I still saw many people turning to Jesus when I do alter call after preaching. My church is growing and people say it is because of the way I preach. With this training I can think more people will join my little church.

### *Focus Group Data*

This portion of the study deals directly with information gathered from the focus group.

The focus group was made up seven elders in the associate order all of whom serve as leaders of zones within the District Conference. The Gbarnga District Conference is divided into seven zones. Each zone is headed by a supervising elder who supervise the pastoral activities of all pastors within that zone, both ordained and those not ordained. These supervising pastors have ages ranging from fifty-five to seventy-one years and have been in pastoral ministry between sixteen and forty-six years.

According to the District Superintendent, the criteria for serving as a supervising pastor for a zone is based on the pastor's years of service, leadership ability, and demonstrated commitment to servant leadership. Because the seven supervising pastors participated in the five-day training event, they were an appropriate core group to serve as the focus group for the study. The focus group met two weeks after the five-day training event at the Gbartala United Methodist Church in Gbartala Town which serves as a central point for participants. The discussion with the focus group was centered on research question #3.

Before getting to the focus group questions, the researcher explained the purpose of the gathering after the training and shared the findings from the twenty-five participants that formed part of the five-day training event which they were part. The

conversation turned almost into another training session with members of the focus group asking several questions that turned the first couple of hours into fruitful questions and answers period.

After carefully reviewing the data collected from the twenty-five participants that were part of the five-day training event and having meticulously analyzed said data, most of what the researcher heard from the focus group was not much different from responses of the twenty-five pastors that participated in the training. Participants of the focus group expressed their limitations and the challenges they face in preparing and delivering sermons that are properly exegeted, biblically based, theologically sound and homiletically excellent. They all said they were limited and challenged because they were not privileged to attend seminary to acquire a seminary education. They also acknowledged that regardless of this seeming limitation, trainings offered by the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church have been very helpful in upgrading their preaching abilities.

Additionally, the focus group was unanimous that the main critical issue that needed urgent attention was the establishment of a full-scale continuing education program to upgrade the pastoral capacities of rural pastors, especially in the area of preaching, evangelism and discipleship.

Four questions were asked on the post-test questionnaire to answer research question #3.

The first question was, “What aspect of employing the proper use of exegesis, scripture, theology and homiletic in sermon preparation and delivery were most helpful and impactful during the five-day training experience?”

Most of them said introducing them to the use of exegesis and looking at the scripture text critically were most helpful. However, a few of them say that with knowledge acquired from previous trainings offered by the Board of Ordained Ministry in addition to the five-day training event, they believe they have some level of knowledge adequate enough to train other local pastors, especially lay pastors not yet ordained. They thought the knowledge acquired, especially in the area of exegesis would greatly improve their sermon preparation and delivery skills. In addition, they felt prepared to share this knowledge with others.

One focus group member made a comment of how she believes the use of scripture and exegesis are useful tool in the preparation of a good sermon:

One thing I can say is that the people in my church who sometimes complain that I do not preach well only because I did not graduate from GST (GST is the Gbarnga School of Theology of the United Methodist University located on the Gbarnga United Methodist Mission Station in Gbarnga City, Bong County) will no longer say that because from now I will be able to prepare and deliver good sermons.

The second question was, “What portion of the five-day training experience in preparing and delivering sermons were least helpful?” Again, the majority agreed with the twenty-five participants that the use of theology in the preparation and delivery of sermon was least helpful because they do not put much emphasis on theology when preparing sermons. However, when asked if the use of theology in the preparation and delivery of sermons was not important, they were quick to point out that the use of

theology is important in preparing and delivering sermons. It was only because that they have not been introduced to using theology in preparing sermon that it did not seem important. One male focus group member said he was glad to have an idea of how to apply theology in the preparation and delivery of sermons.

They all affirmed that since they understand training is very important, they would insist at every level that pastors on the District receive training on a regular basis.

The third question was, “What would you change or add to make the training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermons more impactful and helpful following the five-day training experience?” In discussing this question, they all reaffirmed the need for longer time period for such a training event. They were also in agreement that for future training, topics dealing with pastoral ethics, especially pastoral sexual ethics be taught because they have seen some of their clergy colleagues get into trouble as a result of breaching pastoral ethical standards. One member of the focus group said:

“I would be glad to see this kind of issue talk about during future training. I think it will be good for all of us.”

The fourth question was, “How has the proper use of exegesis, scripture, theology, and homiletics improved the way you prepare and deliver sermons following the five-day training event?” During the discussion of this question, it was revealed that majority of the focus group members believed strongly that the use of exegesis, scripture and theology are very useful in the preparation and delivery of sermons. They all held the view that their sermons would be much more improved due to the added knowledge gained during the training.

Because of the large membership of the Gbarnga District Conference and the very large turn out during the hosting of their 74<sup>th</sup> District Conference session, the researcher wanted to know what was responsible for the rapid membership increase within the District Conference.

“What is the secret of your membership increase and church growth initiatives?”

The responses received from this question revealed that the pastors placed priority on evangelism and discipleship. One of the focus group members indicated that his church has eleven preaching points and he is currently working hard to elevate all of them to full local church status in two years. A preaching point is a gathering of baptized Christians that meet for worship and other activities under the pastoral supervision of the local church that establishes the preaching point. Usually, the pastor would assign a certified lay speaker to the preaching point until such a time it has been nurtured to be declared a full United Methodist Church.

Another member of the focus group also had this to say about how he goes about planting preaching points:

I usually tour the chiefdom to give me an idea of areas where there are no churches. I then carryout crusades one or twice and at the end I would invite people to give their life to Jesus. Thereafter, I begin Bible study in the home of one of those who gave his or her life to Jesus Christ and after some time the group turns into a preaching point.

It was fascinating to learn the secret of the membership growth of the Gbarnga District Conference which did not come up prior to and following the five-day training experience.

Another revelation at the close of the discussion was to hear from three of the focus group members that they believe they have acquired a level of knowledge in

preparing sermons that is adequate enough to train other pastors who are not ordained.

The researcher did not get this information from the pastors prior to and following the five-day training event. One of them said with great confidence:

“I am very sure I have enough training on how to prepare and deliver sermons and I am prepared to use what I know to train other Lay pastors, trust me.”

### **Summary of Major Findings**

This research project has produced the following significant findings:

1. There is a need for ongoing, periodic training for rural pastors in the area of sermon preparation and delivery so that they become more effective in proclaiming God's Word.
2. Training sessions can be used to identify and equip future trainers.
3. There is a need to include topics dealing with the use of theology in sermon preparation and delivery during training events for rural pastors.
4. There is a desire for a Rural Pastors' School that addresses many issues and needs in relation to ministry, not just preaching.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

The United Methodist Church in Liberia has experience membership growth in recent years. This increase has put significant pressure on the Bishop and his cabinet and the Board of Ordained Ministry in the recruitment, training and placement of rural pastors to carry out the task of preaching evangelism and discipleship. In response to this pressure, this study experimented with a form of training lay pastors, specifically in preaching.

The purpose of this research was to measure the changes in knowledge, attitude and practices among rural pastors in the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church who participated in a five-day training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermons.

This chapter discusses the major findings of the research study and the bearing the literature review had on the findings. It also addresses the question of how biblical and theological issues raised in the findings relate to the overall purpose of the study. The chapter also delves into the ministry implications of the major findings, especially in terms of how the findings can be used as a model for future ministry initiatives. The chapter concludes with relevant recommendations that highlights ways the study can be a vital ministry tool in the future.

## Major Findings

### First Finding:

#### **Need for ongoing, periodic training for rural pastors in the area of sermon preparation and delivery.**

##### *Personal Observation*

For the past ten years, I have been actively involved with training rural pastors of the United Methodist Church of Liberia in my role as member of the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Conference. Most of the training events are designed in such a way that there is the theoretical portion which deals with various methods of sermon preparation and delivery and another section that deals with the practical aspect where trainers are given the opportunity to prepare and deliver sermons. Usually after delivering the sermons, the pastors critique each other with the guidance of the trainer or facilitators. It has always been a time of learning and sharing. Based on their ministry context, they suggest ways they feel their sermons would resonate with their congregations. The facilitators often learn from the participants as well.

All twenty-five participants in the five-day training event have participated in one or two of the trainings offered by the Board. Prior to the training events, the researcher expected some of them to have had some basic knowledge about sermon preparation and delivery. This was not the case. Almost all of them indicated that they had limited or no knowledge in the area of sermon preparation and delivery and that the levels of their current knowledge was inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry.

It was observed that most of them had forgotten the basics of sermon preparation and delivery from previous training events because they were quick to respond in positive

ways when reminded of what they were taught in previous trainings administered by the Board of Ordained Ministry. For example, they would quickly remember that every sermon must be based on a biblical text. After the training event, most of the participants had some confidence that they could prepare and deliver a better sermon based on scripture, properly exegeted, and theologically sound. After analyzing the post-test questionnaire, the researcher concluded that though the training was very helpful in meeting its objective, it was not adequate for lifelong preaching ministry. There was a need to constantly train these rural pastors if they were to continue to preach evangelism and discipleship so that the world may be transformed.

#### *Biblical and Theological Foundations*

The need to train more pastors cannot be overemphasized. The biblical framework of this study makes it clear that teaching is a biblical mandate and that it is certainly through teaching that people gain knowledge. This point is made very clear in Chapter Two of this study under the headlines “People Perish for Lack of Knowledge” and “Teaching: A Biblical Mandate” (19 & 20). For lack of knowledge people perish and for them not to perish there is an urgent need for a program of continuing education for rural pastors so that they are effective in preaching evangelism and discipleship. Also, scripture holds that teaching is critical if the Word of God is to be effectively proclaimed. This mandate is made clear in Matthew 28.20a when Jesus told his disciples to “Teach them to obey everything I have commended you.” The fact that people perish for lack of knowledge coupled with the mandate that scripture places on teaching and equipping pastors through teaching and training supports the finding that there is a need for

ongoing, periodic training for rural pastors in the area of sermon preparation and delivery so that they become effective in proclaiming God's Word.

### *Literature Review*

For the Word of God to take roots in the hearts of people, the Word must be articulated in simple and clear ways by the preacher. An effective way for this to happen is for preachers to be trained in the art of preparing and delivering sermons. Paul makes the argument:

“If people are to be saved what needs to happen is for God to ‘send’, to commission as ‘apostles, people who will take the message to them. It is further noted that Paul understands the message concerning the servant of God to be the message about Jesus the Messiah”. (Keck 667)

Those who God commission should receive periodic training to strengthen their skills from time to time so that they are equipped for the task assigned them. This argument as indicated in the literature review also gives support to the need for periodic training of pastors if they are to preach evangelism and discipleship in Liberia.

### **Second Finding**

**Training sessions can be used to identify and equip future trainers.**

#### *Personal Observation*

The United Methodist Church in Liberia is growing at a fast pace in rural areas. When one listens to conversation among graduating seniors of the School of Theology of the United Methodist University in Liberia, the discussion often centers on being assigned to local congregations that pays very attractive salary with other benefits. The conversation among rural pastors who do not have the academic standard to pursue

seminary education is different. For most of them, the conversation is all about service. To maintain this trend of having more rural pastors train that will go out to train other, I believe the training sessions are appropriate venues where smart and dedicated pastoral leaders can be scouted to receive further training for the purpose of training other rural pastors.

Prior to the five-day training event, I had no clue that there were some pastors who felt very strongly they had acquired some level of training in sermon preparation and delivery to help other until he had the opportunity to meet with the focus group. I was convinced by their level of participation, especially when we had the time to develop a sermon together from beginning to end.

People are born with the natural ability to acquire new knowledge through the process of learning. People overcome fear when they gain confidence in themselves. I believe this is what happened during my time with supervising elders that made up the focus group. I am of the strong conviction that training sessions can be a place where future trainers capable of training other rural pastors can be identified.

#### *Biblical and Theological Foundations*

The session with focus group provided an opportunity for a more open discussion where participants felt more relax to engage and express themselves. It was the impact of the training that gave participants the confidence that they were prepared to train others. When Joshua challenged his fellow countrymen to choose between the worship of God or the God their forefathers worshiped beyond the River, they decided to worship the Almighty God.

Besides, faith comes through proclamation. It was through hearing and understanding the basic concepts of sermon preparation and delivery during the training session that participants were equipped for the task of training others. The training afforded participants to acquire some level of biblical literacy necessary in the area of sermon preparation and delivery to be able to transmit that knowledge to other rural pastors. Larry Perkins defines biblical literacy as “the ability and motivation of people to read the Bible with sufficient understanding so that they can explain its basic meaning, having sufficient knowledge and skill to use resources that enable them to discern the basic meaning of a biblical text.” (“What is ‘Biblical Literacy’”).

Hence, when an enabling forum is made available during which people seek to aspire to their highest human potential, there is an opportunity for people to be identified and recruited to be leaders over others, especially to mentor and train others. This supports the finding that training sessions can be used to identify and equip future trainers.

### *Literature Review*

The purpose of identifying pastors during training session would be to undergo further training so that they are able to train others, specifically in knowing how to prepare and deliver sermons. They would be training preachers to proclaim the Word of God effectively. In the literature review, Knowles portrays the preacher as a messenger of God whose job is made difficult without the approval of God who gives the message in the first place. When preachers are identified during training session as those to receive further training for the purpose of equipping others for ministry, it is like preparing them to train future preachers who will be community spokespersons or problem solvers.

Gilbert and Thomas argue that the preacher as a community spokesperson has a prophetic role in calling attention to moral decay and other social ills in the larger society. (Gilbert 17; Thomas ix). Those who are identified during training sessions will be trained to equip other pastors. As a result, these pastors will therefore serve as valuable resource assets that will continue to train others outside of the regular Board of Ordained Ministry training initiatives.

### **Third Finding:**

#### **The use of theology in sermon preparation and delivery during training events for rural pastors.**

##### *Personal Observation*

During and following the five-day training event, I observed that the participants had very limited knowledge of using theology in the preparation and delivery of sermon. In fact, they told me they always hear people talk about theology and wanted to know what theology was all about. I took up some time to explain the meaning of theology and how it can be used when preparing sermon. I could tell from their facial expressions that they were not much interested in the topic. I later learned that it was the first time they were learning about theology. Whenever theology was introduced as an important tool for the preparation and delivery of sermon the discussion with participants became less interactive. This was not the case when we were discussing exegesis and its place in the preparation and delivery of sermons.

Because I have been actively involved in the training and equipping of rural pastors to be effective preachers, I was not surprised that these rural pastors had no knowledge in using theology in preparing sermons. The Committee of the Board of

Ordained Ministry responsible for training had assumed that since rural pastors did not have the requisite education to pursue seminary education; there was no need to introduce them to theology. So, they focused on areas directly related to the basics of sermon preparation, especially exegesis. I was therefore not taken by surprise that when they were asked to respond to what aspect of the five-day training event was least helpful, it was revealed that the majority felt the use of theology in the preparation and delivery of sermons was least helpful and impactful.

This is a wakeup call to the Board of Ordained Ministry that is responsible for training rural pastors to include the use of theology as a very useful tool when preparing sermons.

#### *Biblical and Theological Foundations*

Those who proclaim the Word of God must do so in clear and unambiguous manner. They must do so in such a way that those who hear the message should understand it in clear terms so that they are convicted and become followers of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul made similar point to his mentee Timothy: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the Word of truth.” (II Tim. 2.15 NIV)

Rural pastors are trained and “approved” to handle the “Word of truth.” Any training lacking these objectives may look like a training but lacks the substance thereof. When rural pastors are trained to preach evangelism and discipleship, the messages they preach should change lives in significant ways. Moses’s message to his people changed their lives; it caused them to choose life over death by worshipping God. The same was

with Joshua when he challenged his fellow countrymen to remain faithful to God: (Josh. 24.14-15).

The command of Joshua, as articulated in the literature review reveals the impact of how effective and impactful rural pastors become when they are trained to prepare and deliver sermons that are biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent. When sermons are properly prepared along these lines they resonate with the hearers and change their lives in positive ways. The introduction of theology during the five-day training event as useful in preparing and delivering sermons was very important. Though participants did not realize how critical the use of theology was when preparing sermons during the training, the researcher was satisfied that it was part of the training because he believes they will realize its significance when they begin to apply it when preparing their sermons. The biblical and theological foundations of this study therefore relate to and support the need to include the use of theology when preparing sermon during training of rural pastors.

### *Literature Review*

The argument has been made that rural pastors are called to preach and in doing so they serve as mouth-piece for God. Preachers are like ambassadors of God. No one can claim to be an ambassador of God who lacks the basic understanding of the nature, character, and characteristics of God. The study of theology seeks to understand these fundamentals of God. Theological foundations are the basic framework within which training for rural pastors in Liberia takes place. This theological framework begins with the contextual understanding of God, God's activity in the world and God's relationship with humans, especially Liberians.”

These rural pastors went through a terrible civil conflict and are witnesses of how God led them and their family members to safety zones and provided them food to eat when bullets were flying. These rural pastors are theologians in their own rights; they know theology but are unfamiliar of the word theology and its meaning. Including the study of theology as an important ingredient in the preparation and delivery of sermon is highly related to this finding as highlighted in the literature review.

#### **Fourth Finding**

##### **A desire for a Rural Pastors' School.**

###### *Personal Observation*

During the five-day training event, several of the participants indicated to me the need for the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church to consider the establishment of training school for rural pastors, especially those of them who do not have the educational background to attend seminary. This call was again revealed during my time with the focus group after the training event. These rural pastors were clear that with the establishment a rural pastoral training school there would be adequate time to address many other issues and needs in relation to ministry, not just trainings aimed at equipping rural pastors to be effective in sermon preparation and delivery.

The research participants were all in agreement that with their current level of training in the area of sermon preparation and delivery, the establishment of a School to focus on training rural pastors would go a long way in strengthening their ministerial capacities.

During the discussion I recalled reminding them about how some preachers go about trying to put their own words and thoughts into the text instead of allowing the text to speak for itself when doing exegesis.

I was taken by surprise when one of them told the gathering that when a preacher does that, he will be doing eisegesis and not exegesis. When pressed further to explain what he meant, he said preachers have the tendency when they want to get at people in the church, to force into the text an idea to suit what they want to say. I was then very impressed to know that these rural pastors were catching up on the training and understanding the use of exegesis when preparing sermon.

#### *Biblical and Theological Foundations*

If rural pastors are to be prophetic in the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the establishment of a pastoral school will serve the purpose of providing an opportunity for extended period of teaching them the art and craft of preparing and delivering sermons that are prophetic in nature. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale makes reference to Cornel West as asserting that prophetic preaching is concern with “human acts of justice and kindness that attend to the unjust sources of human hurt and unnecessary social misery. It highlights personal and institutional evil,” (48).

Because prophetic preaching usually challenges the status quo and offers an alternative option, prophetic preaching when introduced to rural pastors will be something new and interesting. In most African traditions, the pastor is expected to stay out of politics. When a pastor speaks against the ills of society he or she is often branded as being political and may get in trouble with the political establishment of the day.

Additionally, a pastoral school will serve a hub for biblical literacy for rural pastors who do not have the educational background to attend seminary.

In addition to trainings provided rural pastors by the Board of Ordained Ministry, the pastoral school will offer other theological and non-theological courses to make them effective pastors. Subjects such as the basics English, introduction to moral and sexual ethics will be taught at the school. The training of rural pastors in a more formal educational setting like a school setting cannot be overemphasized.

Jonathan Groves suggests that any biblical literacy work for rural pastors in Africa must take into consideration their culture. He argues that such culture must take into consideration that fact that Africans had a unique understanding of God prior to the introduction of Christianity by the early missionaries. (Chapter 2, p96).

When the African faced the waterfall to pray, she was praying to the supreme deity that gave rise to the mystery of the waterfall. Hence, the establishment of a school for rural pastors will help sharpen their understanding of the God who called them to be preachers and as such the biblical and theological foundations of this study support the finding for the establishment of a school for rural pastors.

### *Literature Review*

The literature review also reveals the kind of training necessary for rural pastors. It calls attention to what it refers to as Theological Education by Extension (TEE) as “an alternative to formal theological training where there was a need for a residential program, strict educational requirement, and a ““curriculum with... strong emphasis on reading and writing [which] was often beyond the academic capabilities of many leaders”

(Baylor 38). Theological Education by Extension had three modules: “cognitive input, field experience, and seminars” (Baylor 38).

When a school for rural pastors is established that addresses other important subject matter the plan would take on an extended program that focuses on not only training geared toward effective ways to plan and deliver sermons, but also basic understanding of Christian ethics and many other related courses such as theology, church planning, and church history.

### **Ministry Implications of the Findings**

This research project has revealed several specific conclusions that have important implications for ministry, especially as it relates to training rural pastors to preach evangelism and discipleship in Liberia. Some of the conclusions challenge the Liberia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church to be intentional about training rural pastors to become more effective if the trend of membership growth within the United Methodist Church is to continue.

When rural pastors are adequately trained to prepare and deliver sermons, the sermons they preach will be clear, concise, and understandable. As a result, those who hear the message contained in the sermon will respond in ways that lead them to Christ. As more people hear the message and are led to the saving grace of Jesus Christ the church grows exponentially. This is the mission of the church, to make disciples of Jesus so that the world may be transformed.

Jesus commanded His disciples to “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”

(Matt. 28.19 NIV). Throughout the New Testament, disciple making remained a critical tool in bringing people to faith through Jesus Christ. Jesus took some time to equip his disciples for effective ministry. He led by example and His disciples learned from Jesus what they saw Him do.

Another implication of this study is that it can be used as a model to equip not only rural pastors for ministry but also other local pastors appointed to various ministry sites who have not had the opportunity to undergo training. It can be used as a road map for denominational and non-denominational religious organizations interested in equipping pastors for ministry, especially in the area of preparing and delivering sermons. As noted in the literature review, it is only when the Word of God is spoken that people get to hear it. Conversely, it is only when the Word is effectively conveyed that people are convicted by what the Word says to them. Those who are entrusted with proclaiming God's Word are preachers who must bring their best to sermon preparation and proclamation.

The implication for ministry is that when rural pastors are trained the messages they preach are impactful. The messages so preached have the anointing and conviction to win souls to Christ Jesus. When pastors are trained to serve as mouthpiece for God, they do so with great care and effectiveness. Speaking about the Word of God that is entrusted to preachers, Isaiah writes: "So my word that goes out from my mouth, it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Isa. 55.11 NIV)

As a critical tool for effective pastoral ministry, this study reveals the fact that when pastors receive training on a periodic basis in other areas of ministry other than

sermon preparation and delivery, they are in a better position to preach, evangelize and disciple in Liberia.

Another implication for ministry is the awareness that pastors are called to be prophetic in their words and deeds. Prophetic preaching often challenges the status quo and calls for an alternative system that assures justice and equality for those who live and survives at the margins of society. Prophetic preaching is about looking in the face of the powers that be and speaking the truth. This often gets preachers into trouble and sometimes causes their death. Prophetic preaching can also convict people of their wrongdoing and move them to seek forgiveness.

This study has provided a foundational tool that can be built upon for the purpose of training rural pastors to be prophetic in proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ in rural areas that are hostile to the Gospel message. Indeed, if the church in Liberia is to continue to make positive impact in winning souls for God's Kingdom on the one hand and to continue its aggressive outreach in confronting the spread of Islam and other competing African Traditional religious practices, the training model advanced in this study can be a critical resource tool for the practice of ministry, especially for preparing pastors to be good at sermon preparation and delivery.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Two major limitations of this study can be identified. The first is that the study was limited to pastors. The purpose of the study was to measure the levels of knowledge of rural pastors prior to and following five-day of training on how to prepare and deliver sermons that are biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and

homiletically excellent, preachers do not preach in vacuum. The participants were pastoral leaders of active local United Methodist Churches where they preach every Sunday.

Perhaps an extended portion of the study should have involved some members of the local churches where these pastors serve. I believe selecting few of the churches with the view of interviewing their members as to what has change or what has not change in the skills of their pastors' sermon preparation and delivery would have been helpful.

The second limitation is that the Gbarnga District Conference where the study was conducted is dominated by a single ethnic group, the Kpelleh speaking people. Different ethnic groups in Liberia have their unique cultural and other traditional norms and practices that have implications on their professional and vocational life. Maybe conducting the study in a context that is more diverse culturally and ethnically would have broadened the scope of the study to allow wide range of perspectives on sermon preparation and delivery.

### **Unexpected Observations**

The first unexpected observation was the passion and enthusiasm with which participants in both the five-day training and the focus group actively engaged in the discussion. I have always been involved in training of rural pastors over the years and have not witnessed rural pastors so involved that they were even asking if the sessions could be extended. This was the same experience I experienced during the time with the focus group. Their engagement revealed that such training events could be a potential

place where smart individuals could be identified to receive further training so that they could train others.

The second unexpected observation was the request I received from members of the focus group to conduct similar trainings in the various zones where they serve as supervising pastors. Since the news of the training regarding the study spread across the district that a select group of twenty-five pastors had been selected to participate, my anticipation was that the entire District Conference received the information that it was not the usual training conducted by the Board of Ordained Ministry. So, it took me by surprise to have received such a request.

The third and final unexpected observation was the affirmation, approval, and support I received from the Bishop when I shared with him the purpose of the study and some of the recommendations I had advanced. He shared with me that the study was timely because he is convinced that it will be a critical resource tool that will contribute to efforts aimed at improving the ministerial capacities of pastors serving in rural areas where the church continues to grow at a fast pace.

The Bishop assured me of his support to explore with church leaders the possibility of establishing a pastoral school exclusively for rural pastors where they will receive training in all areas of ministry and not only in sermon preparation and delivery. He further indicated that in the event the Conference is unable to support the establishment of a school for rural pastors, he will work with the Conference Council on Finance and Administration (CCF&A) so that adequate budgetary allocation is provided for training through the Board of Ordained Ministry so that rural pastors are trained.

### **Recommendations**

In light of the findings from this research project, the following recommendations are herein proffered. Firstly, to ensure that rural pastors are effective in their preaching skills, especially in the preparation and delivery of sermons that are deeply rooted in scripture, properly exegeted, theologically sound and homiletically excellent, the Annual Conference must adequately support the training initiative of the Board of Ordained Ministry through appropriate budgetary allocation annually. When pastors are trained, they will be effective in their ministerial functions. Members will receive adequate pastoral care at the highest level, the messages they preach will make positive impact on the hearers. Many will come to faith in Jesus Christ, and the mission of the Church in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world will be accomplished.

Secondly, it is recommended that a Pastoral Training School be established by the United Methodist of Liberia specifically for rural pastors. The intent of this recommendation is to provide an opportunity for continuing education for rural pastors who do not have the requisite educational competence to enroll in theological school. The plan is not to construct a structure but to work with the School of Theology of the United Methodist University (UMU) to design appropriate curriculum for said purpose. Called the Pastoral Training School, the program would be intensive in nature and rural pastors would converge on the campus of the School of Theology of the United Methodist University in Gbarnga City for a month of training in several areas of pastoral ministry.

Thirdly, through a resolution, the United Methodist Church of Liberia should set aside a special Sunday within the year for all local churches to raise funds for the support

of ministry. There are many rural pastors across the conference who do not receive salary at the end of the month. Funds raised from this special Sunday will be administered by the Board of Ordained Ministry to support cost related to training of rural pastors.

Fourthly, the Liberia United Methodist Church should develop a realistic, equitable and livable salary scheme for all categories of pastors with special attention given rural pastors serving in towns and villages that lack basic social, educational, health care and other critical services. When pastors receive income that can cope with the harsh economic realities of the day, they are able to take care of their families and the Word of God entrusted to their care.

### **Postscript**

I am not sure if I have words appropriate enough to express how I feel about this research journey. It has been a life changing experience for me in various ways. Firstly, I began the research study with apprehension and concerns about my ability to undertake a research of this nature. Over the years, I have earned two bachelor's degrees and one master degree and never had the opportunity to write a thesis. As I engaged course work, writing and completing a dissertation was my greatest fear. As I reflect, I cannot just imagine that I am at this stage of the dissertation. It must be God's doing! Praise the Lord!

This research study was concerned about equipping rural pastors through training to preach evangelism and discipleship in Liberia. Making use of relevant research tools, it measured the levels of knowledge of these pastors in regard to preparing and delivering sermons that are rooted in scripture, properly exegeted, sound theologically, and

homiletically excellent. The goal of the training was to make rural pastors effective in ministering to their various congregations so that more persons are brought to faith in Jesus Christ through the sermons they preach.

During this research journey, I conducted a five-day training event geared toward strengthening their skills of rural pastors in the art of preparing and delivering sermons. During one session of the training in the use of exegesis, the group selected John 5:1-9. This text records the healing of a paralyzed man at the Sheep Gate. After going through the exegetical steps, there was a consensus among participants that the most appropriate theme was “Take up your mat and walk.” One of the participants, I remember an elderly female in her mid-sixties, had a different suggestion. The others were anxious to hear what she had to say. The theme she proposed was: “Jesus, the miracle worker.” As lead facilitator and trainer, I was so deeply impressed that our efforts in training pastors was making significant impact. We often take for granted that rural pastors can understand theological issues even though they are not seminary graduates.

This study has exposed me to a new understanding when people are properly thought to acquire new skills they perform at a higher level of efficiency. I have come to realize this during this journey of working on a dissertation. The journey was a tough one, especially being in full time ministry. As Director of Connectional Ministry of the United Methodist Church in Liberia and serving as senior pastor of a small membership church while pursuing a Doctor of Ministry degree was a challenging journey. What kept me awake was the realization that I was not alone. Every time I get weary and want to give up, I heard whisper of Jesus in a small voice reminding me in these words: “George, remember that I called you from your career as an electrical engineer to be my servant.

Keep pressing on, I am with you to the end.” I just cannot say more than this. It was indeed a wonderful and rewarding experience.

The Doctor of Ministry Team and the professors during this journey were extraordinary! They were always willing to listen and to help whenever they could do so. I believe this journey is not over until it is over. By this I mean, the model of training rural pastors as contained in this study can be a valuable resource asset that will be used equip rural pastors across denominational lines to become effective in proclaiming the undiluted Gospel of Jesus Christ.

## APPENDIXES

### APPENDIX A

#### Pre Test Questionnaire

Dear Participants,

I greet you all in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. I am a Doctor of Ministry student at the Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky and currently working on my dissertation titled: *Equipping for Ministry: Preparing Rural Pastors to Preach Evangelism and Discipleship in Liberia*. The purpose of this research is to measure changes in knowledge, attitude, and practices among pastors of the Gbarnga District Conference of the United Methodist Church who participate in a five-day training experience on preaching.

**Please choose the number that best answers each question for you.**

1. What is your gender? (A) Female (B) Male
2. Please choose your age range:
  - A. 20-30 years
  - B. 31-40 years
  - C. 41-50 years
  - D. 51-60 years
  - E. 61-70 years
  - F. 70 years and above
3. How many years have you been a pastor? Please indicate \_\_\_\_\_
4. How long have you been serving in current church? Please indicate \_\_\_\_\_
5. Have you participated in any other training about preaching over the last 5 years?  
(A) Yes (B) No  
If yes, please state training:  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. On a scale of 1-4 what is your level of understanding in regard to preparing and delivering a biblically based sermon?
  - 1=Inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry
  - 2=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement
  - 3=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry
  - 4=Advanced enough to help train other preachers

7. What is your level of understanding in regard to preparing and delivering a properly exegeted sermon?

1=Inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry

2=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement

3=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry

4=Advanced enough to help train other preachers

8. What is your level of understanding in regard to preparing and delivering a theologically sound sermon?

1=Inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry

2=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement

3=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry

4=Advanced enough to help train other preachers

9. What is your level of understanding in regard to preparing and delivering a homiletically excellent sermon?

1=Inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry

2=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement

3=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry

4=Advanced enough to help train other preachers

10. On a scale of 1-4 what is your current level of skill in preparing and delivering a biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermon following the five-day training experience?
- 1=Inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry
- 2=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement
- 3=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry
- 4=Advanced enough to help train other preachers
11. Please explain why it *is* or *is not* important as a preacher to offer biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermons?
12. Please describe your method of preparing and delivering sermons. What does that process look like from beginning to end?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Post Test Questionnaire**

**Please choose the number that best answers each question for you.**

1. On a scale of 1-4 what is your level of understanding in regard to preparing and delivering a biblically based sermon?
- 1=Inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry
- 2=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement
- 3=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry
- 4=Advanced enough to help train other preachers

2. What is your level of understanding in regard to preparing and delivering a properly exegeted sermon?

1=Inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry  
2=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement  
3=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry  
4=Advanced enough to help train other preachers

3. What is your level of understanding in regard to preparing and delivering a theologically sound sermon?

1=Inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry  
2=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement  
3=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry  
4=Advanced enough to help train other preachers

4. What is your level of understanding in regard to preparing and delivering a homiletically excellent sermon?

1=Inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry  
2=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement  
3=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry  
4=Advanced enough to help train other preachers

5. On a scale of 1-4 what is your current level of skill in preparing and delivering a biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermon?

1=Inadequate for lifelong preaching ministry  
2=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry with some needed improvement  
3=Adequate for lifelong preaching ministry  
4=Advanced enough to help train other preachers

6. Please explain why it *is* or *is not* important as a preacher to offer biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermons?

7. Please describe your method of preparing and delivering sermons. What does that process look like from beginning to end?

8. On a scale of 1-4 how would you describe the effect of the training on your ability to prepare and deliver a biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermon?

1=Not improved  
2=Need additional training  
3=Somewhat improved  
4=Significantly improved

9. What aspects of employing the proper use of exegesis, scripture, theology and homiletic in sermon preparation and delivery were most helpful and impactful during the five-day training experience?
10. What portion of the five-day training experience in preparing and delivering sermons were least impactful and helpful?
11. What would you change or add to make the training experience on how to prepare and deliver biblically based, properly exegeted, theologically sound, and homiletically excellent sermon more impactful and helpful?
12. How has the proper use of exegesis, scripture, theology, and homiletics improved the way you prepare and deliver sermons?

## **APPENDIX C**

### **District Superintendent's Approval Letter**



**GBARNGA DISTRICT CONFERENCE  
LIBERIA ANNUAL CONFERENCE, THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
GBARNGA SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY CAMPUS  
GBARNGA CITY, BONG COUNTY  
REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA**

November 10, 2019

Rev. George D. Wilson, Jr.  
The United Methodist Conference Center  
Liberia Annual Conference, The United Methodist Church  
12 Street Sinkor, Tubman Boulevard  
1000 Monrovia, Liberia

Dear Rev. Wilson:

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